

Check against delivery

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**25th SESSION OF THE
CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

**ADDRESS BY MR ARMEN GEVORGYAN, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND
MINISTER FOR TERRITORIAL ADMINISTRATION OF ARMENIA, REPRESENTING
THE CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS**

Honorable Mr. President,
Distinguished members of the Congress,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here before this Congress, representing the Armenian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers.

At the outset, I should like to express my country's appreciation for the close and extensive co-operation that it has enjoyed with the Congress throughout its Chairmanship and especially for the support we have received for our activities in reinforcing local democracy issues, which is a witness to the importance Armenia attaches to local and regional government. But I shall return to this cooperation in more detail.

I should also like to express Armenia's satisfaction that the European Charter of Local Self-Government has now been ratified by all Council of Europe member States. That is a major achievement and demonstrates clearly the commitment of member States to fostering and supporting strong and effective local self-government.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme that has been chosen for this session "*Europe in Crisis – challenges to local and regional democracy*" could not be more relevant. All member States, without exception, are facing greater or lesser difficulties at the present time. And when a state faces serious economic and/or social challenges, local authorities are frequently called upon to absorb

the impact of these difficulties and to take action at the grass roots level to ensure that the well-being and fundamental rights of citizens are not compromised.

When resources are scarce, but challenges are great, one may feel discouraged and daunted by the responsibilities with which we are entrusted as elected representatives. But it is during times of crisis where strong leadership and good governance are particularly needed, and indeed rightly expected from the electorate. The debate that you are going to have today in the afternoon will therefore certainly be of great value – and I hope to be a source of innovative ideas.

Against this background, my statement today will cover three areas which I consider of mutual and current interest to the Congress and the Committee of Ministers. Firstly, an overview of certain of the Chairmanship's priorities; secondly, some brief information with regard to relevant developments in the work of the Committee of Ministers and finally, in my national capacity as Minister for Territorial Administration of Armenia, a few words with regard to the situation of regional and local democracy in Armenia.

The four main priorities of the Armenian Chairmanship in the Committee of Ministers in the Council of Europe are:

First, to combat racism and xenophobia in Europe; promoting European values through intercultural dialogue;

Second, to strengthen European standards on human rights and on the rule of law;

Third, fostering democratic societies and;

Fourth, reinforcing the role of the Council of Europe in the European architecture.

Within these priorities, combating racism xenophobia and intolerance, and promoting European values through intercultural dialogue has been one of the main themes of our chairmanship. Racism, xenophobia and intolerance violate human dignity. The current difficult economic climate fuels these attitudes as well as social tensions. At the local and regional level, like at the national level, these serious issues need to be addressed with determination. Special analyses are required to understand and tackle the causes, but also to temper any possible upsurge in tensions. Education and awareness-raising are important tools in this respect.

In support of this priority a High Level Conference on “Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in Europe” was held in Yerevan on 21-22 October, which reflected on various dimensions of these phenomena, such as political discourse, hate speech and racial stereotypes in the social networks and media.

Armenia also actively supports the Council of Europe No Hate Speech movement, including the “Young people combating hate speech online” which it considers relevant and pragmatic. I would like to encourage your Congress and its members to join this initiative.

We also hosted the “2013 Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue” on 2-3 September. It considers that building bridges between cultures and religions is a vital goal and falls within the core mission of this Organization.

Within our priority aimed at strengthening European standards on human rights and rule of law, on 3-5 July a pan-European Conference on “The European legal standards of the rule of law and the scope of discretion of powers in the member States of the Council of Europe” was held in Yerevan. This conference with a high representation from the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe Venice Commission, Constitutional Courts of member states and other institutions adopted a final resolution, which indeed will become a guiding tool for relevant institutions in European countries.

Dear colleagues,

As was the case for Andorra, and will be for Austria with whom Armenian Chairmanship shares common priorities, another major priority for Armenia has been to further develop local democracy – given its role in modern Europe and the Council of Europe agenda.

In this respect, we have, as I mentioned earlier, enjoyed close and fruitful contacts with the Congress. We were pleased to host a Bureau meeting in Yerevan as well as two important Conferences – the first one in June on “Participatory Democracy at Local Level” and the second in October entitled “Making the metropolis citizen-friendly: a challenge for public authorities”.

The first event provided an opportunity to reflect on how the local authorities can become closer to the citizens and ensure their increased participation in the decision making processes with regard to the local and regional issues. The results of the conference were

summarised in the general conclusions, which were delivered by Mr. Herwig Van Staa, the President of the Congress, and were taken note of by the Bureau of the Congress. These are benchmarks for further development of participatory democracy in member states and will have a special importance for the dissemination of the principles stipulated at high level in Utrecht, as well as for implementing them in practice. The development and introduction of new mechanisms for the citizens' participation in local government is especially important given the social organisation and technological progress of today's society's, when there are new platforms and opportunities for all walks of society, for the formulation of collective opinion of social strata and for making local authorities listen to that opinion. This is a challenge and joining the Utrecht declaration will enable countries to join efforts to move forward together in conformity with the principles of local self-governance and develop effective and model mechanisms for practical application.

The conference of the representatives of the capitals of the Council of Europe member states held in Armenia on October 11 was a unique platform to exchange ideas about the capitals, as socio-economic driving forces, social solidarity of the public and exemplary model of public and civic participation. During the conference it was mentioned that the capital cities generate challenges conditioned by intensive economic developments; i.e. environment protection; optimal urban development solutions; infrastructure efficiency; as well as introduction of realistic mechanisms of city development and public interest compatibility. Representatives of capital cities have also underlined, that conditioned by these challenges, they should ensure a kind of organization of urban environment, that cities with extra-dense habitation should remain as a comfortable environment for human habitat focused on the citizen.

The capitals and metropolises are at the same time a unique window to present countries to the international community, as well as to adopt the international experience and localise it. Its importance in the dynamically developing world is hard to overestimate. On the one hand the metropolises can become one of our problems, but they can also be a driving force, hope for a future sustainable, healthy and strong urban life. One should not forget that metropolises are also generators for new jobs and sources of sustainable revenue.

Outside of these specific events, the important role of local and regional authorities in many spheres of concern to the Organization has regularly been highlighted by the Committee of Ministers.

The last such example was during the thematic debate held by the Committee of Ministers last September on “The role of the Council of Europe in addressing the rise of extremism in evolving societies” with the aim of identifying further actions to be undertaken both to prevent and to fight extremism. The topic of *Fighting Extremism at Local and Regional Level* will be the subject of your discussions on Wednesday. This is an excellent example of synergies between the institutions of this Organization, and different levels of government, which can help accelerate progress on serious issues which need to be addressed urgently. Your debate will certainly provide valuable input to the follow-up to the thematic debate of the Committee of Ministers.

I would also like to mention another event of high importance for the whole of the Organization, and of particular relevance to the Congress, which is the World Forum for Democracy to take place in Strasbourg from 27-29 November. The theme for the Forum is “Re-wiring Democracy: connecting institutions and citizens in the digital age”. The challenge put on the table for this event – and I quote from the programme “*is that a decline in democratic participation is often viewed as a symptom of a detachment between citizens and institutions. Social media and social networks enable individuals to exchange, plan, act and interact with politicians and activists outside institutional systems. The Council of Europe is in a unique position to bring together elected politicians and civil society leaders to discuss the impact of this technological change on established democratic structures and institutions*”. End of quote.

The experience and input of the Congress, through the different labs that it will sponsor during the Forum, will I am sure bring a valuable contribution to the various debates.

We are confident that it will be useful to identify and describe the actions, which on one hand will ensure their effective involvement in the local processes and from the other hand will curtail their possible misuse for purposes contrary to the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I should now like to say a few words in my national capacity.

Armenia's cooperation with the Council of Europe, particularly in the framework of co-operation activities, have been most instrumental in strengthening local self-government in Armenia.

The future areas of our cooperation with the Council of Europe are included in 2012-2014 Action plan and we are pleased that the issue of resources necessary for the implementation of the measures included in the local democracy section of the Action Plan has already been settled and using this opportunity I express our deep gratitude to our Danish colleagues. The envisaged technical and expert support will help us to ensure an effective progress in topical directions like territorial-administrative reforms, decentralisation of resources and respective financial resources, expansion of scope and quality of services, improvement with regards the participation, etc.

The long-term objective of the Armenian authorities is the strengthening of democracy and building up of capacities of local authorities in order to enable them to effectively address issues of local importance.

As you are aware the report and recommendation on the observation of the elections for the Agavani (Assembly) of the City of Yerevan held on 5 May will be examined during this session. We attach importance to the assessments and recommendations that you will make, which will certainly be taken into account in our future activities. A monitoring visit by the Congress regarding the implementation of the European Charter on Local Self-Government is also due to take place in Armenia from 26-29 November. Armenia welcomes this cooperation with the Congress.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe is a unique organization. Its *raison d'être* is to promote and protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It has the instruments, the expertise and the tools to do so.

This mission is all the more important during times of crises as this session has recognised. The Congress, the Committee of Ministers and the other institutions of this Organization have the duty to meet the challenges with which we are faced to ensure that the core values for which we stand are defended and the fundamental rights of our citizens are protected. This calls for efforts from all levels of government, including those of local and

regional authorities. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the constant efforts of the Congress to support its priorities and remains convinced that our joint efforts will continue to bear fruit, if we stand firm in our convictions and persevere together in our common objectives.

I wish you constructive and innovative debates this week.

Thank you for your attention.