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**ADDRESS BY Ms ANNE BRASSEUR
PRESIDENT OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

26th PLENARY SESSION OF THE CONGRESS

(Strasbourg, 26 March 2014, 2 p.m.)

Mr President,

Honorable members of the Congress,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Colleagues,

It gives me an enormous pleasure to address you today on the occasion of your plenary session and I would like to thank you for the invitation. Allow me, first of all, to congratulate you on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Congress. The Congress is a unique body in the European political architecture, bringing together local and regional elected representatives from all over Europe, holding debates on the local dimension of topical societal issues as well as acting as the guardian of the European Charter of Local Self-Government – a landmark Council of Europe convention signed and ratified by all 47 member states of our Organisation.

Je vais maintenant prononcer quelques phrases en français. Le vingtième anniversaire du Congrès est également un évènement symbolique pour notre Assemblée, celle-ci ayant soutenu le Congrès dans son institutionnalisation et dans ses réformes dès le début. Nos deux Assemblées d'élus ont réussi à tisser des liens d'amitiés solides au fil des années, en développant une collaboration exemplaire. Je tiens tout particulièrement à saluer le travail des membres de l'Assemblée et du Congrès engagés dans cette coopération : Sir Alan Meale, notre Rapporteur général sur les autorités régionales et locales, mais aussi d'autres membres actifs dont M. Jean-Claude Frécon, Président de la Chambre des pouvoirs locaux, également membre de notre Assemblée.

Permettez-moi également de saluer l'engagement et le travail de mes compatriotes – membres de la délégation luxembourgeoise au Congrès. Le Grand-Duché de Luxembourg a ratifié la Charte européenne de l'autonomie locale en 1987 et depuis nos communes s'efforcent de gérer leurs compétences décentralisées conformément aux meilleures pratiques européennes. Je suis convaincue que nos 116 communes ont toutes de

bonnes pratiques à partager avec leurs homologues des autres pays membres du Conseil de l'Europe. Le Congrès leur offre cette possibilité qu'elles utilisent activement.

I shall continue my speech in English.

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

As elected representatives of 820 million Europeans, we come to the Council of Europe with our own past, our history, our culture, our local and regional specificities, our sensitivities and our political opinions, but our values and our objectives remain non-negotiable and inalienable. Human rights, democracy and the rule of law must know no borders. Defending these principles is the shared goal of the member states as well as of that of all the bodies of our Organisation.

Therefore, whenever our values, as well as the most fundamental principles which underpin the philosophy of the Council of Europe, are under threat, we must stay united. The crisis in and around Ukraine represents a major challenge for Europe and for our Organisation. In the face of this challenge, the three main bodies of the Council of Europe – the Committee of Ministers, the Assembly and the Congress – must speak with one voice.

Firstly, we must condemn firmly the referendum which was held in Crimea in violation of Ukraine's constitution and legislation, as well as the subsequent decision by the Russian Federation to annex Crimea, in violation of international law. All member states of the Council of Europe must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states – this is a fundamental rule of our Organisation which must be respected by all.

Secondly, we must support Ukraine in its efforts to consolidate its democratic institutions and conduct the necessary reforms. With its standards, co-operation programmes and monitoring mechanisms, the Council of Europe is in ideal position to fulfil this task. Yesterday, I came back from a mission to Ukraine, together with the members of the Presidential Committee of the Assembly and the co-rapporteurs for Ukraine of the Monitoring Committee. During our stay in Ukraine, we met national authorities in Kyiv, as well as regional and local authorities in Donetsk and in Lviv. The reform of Ukraine's regional and local government system is one of the top priorities and, building upon its years-long practice of monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the Congress can provide the Ukrainian authorities with valuable support in this field. The statement on the situation in Ukraine, adopted by the Congress yesterday, suggests a number of measures which could be taken to strengthen local and regional democracy in Ukraine. I encourage you to continue working in this direction, in close co-operation with the Ukrainian central, local and regional authorities and their associations.

On the Assembly's side, your conclusions are of course most interesting for the co-rapporteurs of the Assembly's monitoring committee, which are closely following developments in Ukraine in view of a debate to be held during our April part-session.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On an institutional note, let me now share with you a few thoughts about the co-operation between the Assembly and the Congress, as well as the opportunities for our collaboration.

First of all, let me stress that the co-operation between the Congress and the Assembly has been exceptionally good over the last couple of years, in particular, as regards the issue of collaboration between national, regional and local authorities in addressing the challenges of the economic and financial crisis. Our joint declaration adopted in October last year contains strong political messages to national authorities in all our member states regarding the devolution of responsibilities and revenues to the local authorities as well as the need to ensure proper consultations between different levels of government. The Assembly's General Rapporteur on Local and Regional Authorities – Sir Alan Meale – will continue to work closely with you and your competent committees on the implementation of this declaration.

Allow me also to stress that our Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development continues to follow closely the issues relating to the impact of the austerity measures on the European social model. This is an issue which requires a coordinated response by national, regional and local authorities and co-operation and synergies between the Assembly and the Congress are essential.

Dear colleagues,

Good and effective governance at local and regional level cannot be achieved only by legislative means – although, of course, enabling constitutional and legislative framework at national level is essential for the normal functioning of decentralisation. Having exercised political responsibilities at local level for almost 30 years as a Deputy Mayor of the City of Luxembourg, I know from my own experience, how important it is for local authorities and for their leaders to constantly develop their own competences and skills to deliver high quality public services, engage with the local community, promote the participation of all society groups in the decision-making process as well as in the management of their communities.

In this context, the Congress – which brings together 636 local elected representatives from all over Europe, with their own experiences and practices – is an ideal forum for co-operation and exchange of best practices on matters of local importance. Therefore, I welcome your decision to focus this session of the Congress on the issue of youth empowerment – a key challenge for all local and regional authorities.

The young people are among the most active actors of our society, especially at the local level. Yet, many of them feel that their access to fundamental rights, especially, social and economic rights, is not sufficiently guaranteed. It is true that in most, if not all, of our member states policies in these fields are defined at national level and local authorities' room of maneuver is limited. However, it is the local authorities which implement national policies in the first place and, therefore, can and should involve young people, as well as the general population, in the management of local public services, so as to ensure that their quality is of a high standard and that these services correspond to the specific needs and expectations of the population. In this context, I would like to recall the recent reports of the Assembly calling for the preparation of a European Framework Convention on Youth Rights and on Young people's access to Fundamental Rights, which contain a number of suggestions of concrete actions authorities at all levels could take to improve young people's access to rights. Our Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media stays at your disposal to discuss synergies and joint actions between the Congress and the Assembly on this front.

The participation of young people in local and regional politics, as well as in community affairs in general, is equally important. As elected politicians and representatives of our communities, we should not only work towards maximising the benefits young people receive from authorities, but we should also focus on creating mechanisms and tools which enable young people to contribute to the day-to-day life of the towns

and municipalities they live in. Young people's dynamism, enthusiasm and imagination are tremendous assets. I am thinking in particular about such issues as "living together": integration, intercultural dialogue, and fight against exclusion, where the young people can play a very positive role.

Non-discrimination and the fight against extremism, racism and intolerance are also among the areas where young people can make a valuable contribution, especially at local level, and we look forward to working in close co-operation with the Congress, as well as with other institutions and monitoring bodies of the Council of Europe, within the framework of a future Council of Europe Strategy against racism, hatred and intolerance in Europe which we have recently suggest to launch.

The issue of integration of Roma is also in the focus of our attention and I believe that an effective response to this challenge can only be found through close co-operation between national as well as local and regional authorities. The Congress' experience in this field is particularly valuable as the Alliance of Cities and Municipalities for Roma inclusion provides a good platform for exchanging experiences and good practices between local and regional authorities in this field. Our competent Committees and rapporteurs are your natural interlocutors to address the challenges relating to Roma rights and integration of Roma.

To conclude, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to stress that all the measures we are taking at national or international level will be successful only if their implementation is handled in an adequate way at local and regional level. Therefore, local and regional authorities need to have the right tools, the indispensable competence and the daily commitment to work for the citizens, under their responsibility. The responsibility that lies on your shoulders is enormous but also very rewarding. If I hadn't had the opportunity to work as Deputy Mayor for the City of Luxembourg and get all that experience, I think that I would never had been able to take over the responsibility to chair the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

I now look forward to answering your questions. Thank you very much for your attention.