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**ADDRESS BY MR MEVLÜT ÇAVUŞOĞLU
PRESIDENT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE
TO THE BUREAU OF THE CONGRESS**

Antalya, Friday 13 May 2011, 10 a.m.

President, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I am also very glad to welcome you most warmly to my country and to my home region. I hope you are enjoying Antalya!

It gives me real pleasure to address the Bureau of the Congress today. The Assembly and the Congress play a key role within the Council of Europe: we bring together European politicians elected at national, regional and local level, thus making the voice of 800 million Europeans heard at the European level. Therefore, we must work together actively as reliable and constructive institutional partners of the Committee of Ministers.

Dear friends,

As you know, the Assembly has always supported the work of the Congress. Last week I attended the General Assembly of the Association of Towns awarded the Europe Prize. During this event, I was able to observe once again the importance of the work done by local and regional authorities, especially for individual citizens, but also the complementarity between actions and policies implemented at local and national level.

Local and regional authorities are the very first point of contact with citizens and they, therefore, have a key role in implementing democracy. The challenges our societies have to face today – consequences of the economic crisis, erosion of social protection mechanisms, growing intolerance and violence, to name but a few, - are complex in their nature and require a comprehensive and joint response at national, regional and local level.

The Assembly is fully aware of the need to ensure complementarity in our actions: many of our recommendations and resolutions adopted on the basis of reports by the Assembly's Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs pay special attention to the work of the Congress, asking it to follow up, for example, on environmental questions at the local and regional level and, if necessary, take appropriate measures.

In this context, I should like to stress the close co-operation between the Congress and the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs. In particular, our Sub-Committee on Local and Regional Democracy devotes a large part of its work to matters of common interest and even co-organises events, such as the one to mark Biodiversity Day last year, which was jointly organised by the Assembly, the Congress and the Conference of International NGOs.

Cross-border co-operation is another issue that we wholeheartedly support. Such co-operation is very important for regional socio-economic stability and to help unite neighbouring populations and encourage intercultural learning. I know that our Committee on the Environment has already appointed a member to participate in the meeting on this subject which will be held in Ukraine next month. We are eagerly awaiting the results of this meeting.

Dear colleagues,

Building a pluralistic democratic society, based on the principles of rule of law and the protection and promotion of human rights is a key objective of the Council of Europe. Both the Assembly and the Congress are already actively contributing to achieving this goal. The strengthening of democracy at local and regional level in particular, is one of the key priorities of Ukraine's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers. In this context, I am sure that the Chairmanship's programme will provide many opportunities for joining our efforts on this front.

Another key issue which the Assembly, the Congress and the Committee of Ministers are addressing together is the general rise of extremism, racism, xenophobia and all other types of "phobias" we now observe in Europe.

The fight against extremism is a shared responsibility of national, regional and local authorities. I am very pleased to note that both the Assembly and the Congress are fully engaged in this process. We both have to fight the root causes of the rise of extremism.

While it is our task, as national politicians and members of the Assembly, to establish the framework for promoting social cohesion in our societies, it is the task of regional and local politicians to implement national policies, as well as develop their own targeted action, tailored to the needs of the local communities.

Bearing this in mind, I am pleased to inform you that, during its last part-session in April 2011, the Assembly organised an important debate on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. During the June part-session we will hold another debate on "Living together in the 21st century", which will take into account the report on this subject prepared by the Group of Eminent Persons, which was approved two days ago at the 121st Ministerial Session in Istanbul. I am sure that the Congress also has its own contribution to make to this process and look forward to the Congress' reaction to the conclusions of the Group of Eminent Persons.

Another issue where the Congress' and the Assembly's work is very much complementary, is election observation. In this context, I fully support your decision to devote much more time to this question and welcome your decision to implement new guidelines, inject greater transparency and harmonise your procedures. The results of your work are very useful for our own work when observing parliamentary elections.

Finally, I also want to stress the importance of co-operation between the Assembly and the Congress in the so-called "Chaves group" (the Advisory Group on reviews, established after the Utrecht Ministerial Conference on Local and Regional Government). I personally met with Minister Chaves last year when he visited Strasbourg and expressed my support of his work. Moreover, as you know, the Assembly, through its Sub-Committee on Local and Regional Democracy, supports the Congress' role within the institutional structure of the Council of Europe.

This role is also very important during ministerial conferences, where we share the same goals and where we also have a duty to defend the concerns of our citizens, which are sometimes not seen in the same light at national and intergovernmental level.

Dear colleagues, friends,

Before concluding, let me say a few words about a major institutional challenge our Organisation is facing: and this is the Council of Europe reform process. As you know, the Assembly supported the reform initiatives launched by the Secretary General and closely follows the reform process in which the Congress is engaged. On our side, we have also launched a reform process in the Assembly. A report on this subject was prepared for the January 2011 part-session by a specially created Ad Hoc Committee.

Subsequently, a wide consultation with Assembly Committees, Political Groups and National Delegations was launched. The Ad Hoc Committee is now finalising the report for debate during the June 2011 part-session. On the basis of this report we hope to be able to finalise all changes to our internal rules and regulations by the end of this year, so that we can start the 2012 ordinary session with new structures and rules.

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I have highlighted just a number of issues of common interest to the Assembly and the Congress. I am sure, there are many more things we can do together and I am very much looking forward to strengthening our co-operation even further. If you have any questions you would like to raise with me, I will be happy to take them now.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a very successful meeting.