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ENGLISH only

Chairperson, dear participants,

The subject matter included in this agenda item is vast and it will be difficult to do justice to this item within the time limits available at this meeting. So I start by referring to the written document included in the documentation system for this conference with reference to the Council of Europe and its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. Please consult our contribution for further details.

With regard to the subject of elections, our Congress has a specific responsibility to monitor local and regional elections which has become one of its action priorities. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has carried out almost 100 election observation missions for local elections in the 47 Council of Europe member countries. The practice of observing elections in the Council of Europe began after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as part of the application process of a number of new democracies. The Congress – as guardian of territorial democracy – was charged with observing local and regional elections with the objective of supplementing the work done by the Parliamentary Assembly regarding national and presidential elections. This activity complements the political monitoring of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

The state and conditions of territorial electoral processes are assessed by Congress members – by locally and regionally elected political representatives of 47 Council of Europe member states – **on a peer-to-peer basis**. This specific role of local and regional elected representatives as observers of territorial votes contributes to the legitimacy and to the credibility of the electoral process at local and regional level. The Congress then addresses its recommendations for improving the situation to national governments, which are under obligation to respond to these recommendations. For a more effective follow-up to this action, we have recently adopted new guidelines for election observation and decided to introduce post-observation assistance programmes, to help with the implementation of our recommendations.

Willing to strengthen co-operation with other International Institutions, the Congress, as part of its agreement with the EU Committee of the Regions invites the COR to join the Congress delegation. In the same way, with the aim to optimise working relations with other institutions in the framework of International Election Observation Missions (IEOM), the Congress will consider proposing to deploy staff to take part in pre-election missions of other institutions (e.g. in ODIHR long-term election observation missions).

As for local and regional democracy, we are currently upgrading our monitoring activities. In this context we expect to have a new monitoring committee as from this month, reflecting our view that monitoring constitutes a priority activity. We have therefore introduced new guidelines for monitoring missions and substantially increased our monitoring capacity with a view to monitoring on a regular basis every State which has ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted 25 years ago. To date 44 of our 47 member States have ratified this Charter, but of the remaining three Andorra will sign the Charter and begin the ratification process this month, leaving Monaco and San Marino.

On the subject of citizenship and political rights, I would like to emphasize that the rights and responsibilities of citizens are central to the understanding of democracy. The quality of a democracy and its proper functioning are dependent on the attitudes and behaviour of its population. "Democratic citizenship" refers to the notion of how people ought to behave, what they need to know and the level of civil and political awareness that is necessary to ensure the health and development of a pluralist democracy.

The city is not only a microcosm of democracy, it is also its cradle. People take their first political steps at the local level. Local authorities have a duty to promote and facilitate active citizenship. The quality of local democracy is an essential building block for the quality of regional, national and international democracy.

In May 2010, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a Charter for democratic citizenship and human rights education. This is a major framework policy document, the product of a period of deliberation within the Council of Europe that began in 1997 when, at the second Council of Europe summit, the Heads of State and Government decided to launch an EDC initiative to promote "citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society", as stated in the final declaration of this Summit. The attention given to EDC at this Council of Europe summit reflects the belief that it is an essential weapon in the battle against the rise in extremism, xenophobia and intolerance. I want to stress that the new Charter deliberately links Education for democratic citizenship with Human Rights Education, on the basis that there can be no democracy without the full understanding and respect for human rights. The Congress of Local and regional Authorities has taken the same stance with respect to local democracy in its recent texts on "The role of local and regional authorities in the implementation of human rights" (Recommendation 280 and Resolution 296 of 2010), when it agreed to assess the human rights situation during its visits to monitor the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

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The EDC Charter also recognises that educational systems in Council of Europe member States are extremely varied, ranging from very centralised systems to those where local authorities have considerable autonomy. Since local authorities are one of several important stakeholders when it comes to EDC, it is

important that, when formulating their ECD policies and strategies, they take full account of the role of other actors in this field, both in the public and the voluntary sector, and seek to create synergies between them. In some cases it will be more appropriate for local authorities to support other partners than to organise their own programmes.

The Congress' contribution to democratic citizenship is reflected in its action to increase citizens' participation at local and regional level. Citizens' participation is crucial for improving local governance and ensuring transparency, efficiency and high ethical standards in local government action. Involving local residents in decision-making is also a sure way of tapping into their great potential for innovation.

The Congress' recent action to boost citizens' participation includes:

- Additional Protocol on citizens' participation to the European Charter of Local Self-Government;
- Promoting the use of new technologies and e-tools at local level in the framework of e-democracy;
- Fostering cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue at local level;
- Advocating policies for local integration of foreign residents, their right to vote and stand in local elections, and the setting-up of their consultative councils;
- Promoting the participation of women in local and regional political life;
- Involving young people at local and regional level, including through children's and youth councils;
- Organising the European Local Democracy Week, an annual European event;
- Advocating a new vision of urban community, laid down in European Urban Charter II: Manifesto for a new urbanity.

In this regard, I would like to stress the importance of the European Local Democracy Week, an event launched in 2007, which is held each year in the week including 15 October, the date that the European Charter of Local Self-Government was opened for signature. The Week aims to raise awareness of how local authorities operate, inform the citizens of opportunities for participating in decision-making at the local level and underline the importance of participation in local affairs for the vitality of local democracy.

Without wishing to be exhaustive, I would like to refer to some of the key texts for democratic citizenship at the local level. These include :

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- the European Charter of Local Self-Government (of 1985)
  - the additional protocol on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (of 2009)
  - the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local level (of 1992)
  - the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and regional Life (of 2003)
  - the Council of Europe Charter for Democratic Citizenship and human rights education (Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7)
  - as well as the EU Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (of 2006).
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Finally, I would like to add that in the field of regional democracy, the Congress has long been advocating the adoption of a legally binding instrument similar to the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The draft European Charter of Regional Democracy, adopted by the Congress in 2008, prompted national governments to elaborate the Reference Framework on Regional Democracy, which was adopted by the European Ministers responsible for Local and Regional Government at their Conference in Utrecht, Netherlands, in November 2009. With this Framework, both national and regional authorities have now a reference point for the creation of regional structures, their functioning and their relations with other tiers of government, and a code of principles for regional democracy. While welcoming this step, the Congress remains committed to working towards a legally binding treaty for regional governance.

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