

The Congress of local and regional authorities



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

First Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Cohesion

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**Speech by Vice-President Svetlana Orlova,
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Council of Europe**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Only 12 years ago, social cohesion was a concept that could be described as needed novelty – a brand new realisation that the changed reality of European integration required erasing not only political dividing lines between countries, but also economic and social dividing lines within society itself, making it more cohesive and therefore more just and sustainable.

The concept of social cohesion was taken on board as one of the main priorities of the Council of Europe in the Action Plan adopted by the second Summit of Heads of State and Government, in Strasbourg as far back as 1997. Now, almost twelve years later, it is heartening to see that the goal of building cohesive societies has developed into a major concept reaffirmed by the third Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government in Warsaw in 2005, the concept which has received full recognition of member states and is institutionalised in the Conference of Ministers responsible for Social Cohesion, the first session of which we are opening today.

The Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which I represent as its Vice-President and Head of the Russian delegation to the Congress, has made social cohesion one of its main priorities as well. The Congress' work in this area is spearheaded by its Committee on Social Cohesion, which has followed closely the work of the Council of Europe Task Force on Social Cohesion whose report will be presented to us at this Conference.

The importance which the Congress attaches to this issue comes as no surprise. It is clear that in a society as a whole, attitudes and practices fostering social cohesion must begin in local and regional communities, in our cities and our regions, and must be led by territorial authorities, local and regional elected representatives. I am talking about promotion of equality, access to social rights, local economic development, intercultural and interreligious dialogue within and between communities, integration of migrants and other foreign residents, eradication of discrimination, action for young people and fair treatment of vulnerable groups – all these issues are factors in achieving the overall goal of social cohesion, and they are all on the political agenda of the Congress.

This is only normal as the competences of local and regional authorities are enlarging in line with the governments' recognition that the implementation of any strategies, policies and measures at national level always begins with their practical application in municipal and regional communities. The knowledge of the terrain, of the citizens' needs and expectations and of what really works on the ground makes territorial authorities important players in national policy-making and increases their role in responding to challenges facing our society today. Turning our cities and regions into cohesive and harmonious communities is one such challenge.

I welcome the report produced by the Council of Europe Task Force on Social Cohesion, which recognises the importance of action for social cohesion at local and regional level and identifies the main challenges to social cohesion today – globalisation, demographic changes, greater migration and cultural diversity, as well as political, economic and social changes. Local and regional communities bear the brunt of the consequences of these phenomena, and their authorities are expected to be the first to respond to them.



This is why we are pleased to see that many of the ideas and avenues for development highlighted in the report tie in with the preoccupations of Congress members. We are also pleased that the report has underlined the importance of social cohesion for democracy – and that both start at local level.

The report reflects the evolution of our understanding of the concept of social rights and social cohesion, understanding that today, social cohesion is a key element of modern democracy, an element which needs to be reinforced, even protected at a time when the gap in the distribution of resources is growing, aggravated by the international financial and economic crisis. We fully support the report's concept of social cohesion, which seeks a broader, more civic and societal responsibility – a responsibility which must be shared by all actors of society and all levels of governance, starting with local and regional. This is a concept which needs to be updated and redefined together with the citizens' themselves. Citizens' involvement in the decision-making on social cohesion is a prerequisite of the success of our efforts.

The Congress is not staying on the sidelines of this process: our understanding and action are evolving as well, as we move ahead with the times, looking at new ways of ensuring both citizens' participation and their access to social rights. In fact, the work of all Congress committees – not only on social cohesion but also on sustainable development, culture and education, and political questions – contributes to enhancing respect for the rights of citizens and communities, including social rights.

The Congress and its Committee on Social Cohesion have been inspired by the report, and some of its future work will be complementary to suggestions made in it. In this work, the Committee will seek to identify the most pressing social problems facing local and regional authorities and to examine how they can develop innovative, participatory and concerted policies to fight exclusion and promote cohesion. Since its creation in 2000, the Committee's work has reflected its members' belief that local and regional authorities need to be particularly vigilant and proactive with regard to the more vulnerable groups in society, in particular those living under the poverty threshold, the elderly, children, victims of violence (domestic, trafficking, urban insecurity, racism) and minorities (national, sexual, immigrants, the disabled).

The Committee's work is an integral part of the overall action by the Congress, which has been looking at issues such as electronic democracy and civic participation, urban planning, consumer responsibility, the development of social cohesion indicators – in a word, the issues which constitute a wider framework for social cohesion and social policy which needs to be constantly re-evaluated and react to the changing world.

This is also one of the objectives of this Conference which, I am sure, will give a new impetus to this process, the process in which local and regional authorities and their Congress should be a key partner of national governments.

Thank you.