



**European Forum Wachau
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“Europe’s Identity – What Remains of Europe?”

**Speech by Keith Whitmore
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Council of Europe**

Herr Vizekanzler,
Herr Landeshauptmann.
Meine Damen und Herren,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address this prestigious European Forum Wachau, which has been dedicated, year after year, to key challenges facing European societies, and to the in-depth reflection on the future direction of European democracy.

I am very pleased to be able to contribute to these discussions today the vision of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe – a vision for the future drawn from the very concrete, grassroots experiences of our more than 600 members, local and regional politicians with very different backgrounds of 47 European countries, from the Azores Islands to the Russian Far East, from Iceland to Azerbaijan. And I am happy to see some Congress members here among us today.

I have often compared Europe with a colourful quilt, rich in its diversity that is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual. And as we celebrate this diversity, which is in the centre of discussions at this Forum, I would like to thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity, and to practice what we preach by saying:

Meine Damen und Herren, ich freue mich sehr, heute mit Ihnen über Europäische Identitäten zu sprechen.

[Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to share with you some thoughts about European identities]

However, my brief presentation of the Congress – this truly pan-European, multi-national assembly of elected representatives, with which I began my statement – would not be complete if I did not mention the active participation in its work of the national delegation from this country, Austria. The strong commitment of the Austrian delegation to the mission of the Congress, their steadfast engagement in its activities have earned many of its members key positions in this institution:

- Dr Herwig van Staa from Tyrol is current President of the Chamber of Regions and former President of the Congress;
- Mrs Gudrun Mosler-Törnström from Land Salzburg, Head of the Austrian delegation, is a very engaged Rapporteur on local and regions elections in Ukraine and on the situation of local and regional democracy in Azerbaidjan;
- Congress Rapporteurs Hannes Weninger from Niederösterreich on elections in Moldova and Erwin Mohr from Vorarlberg on the governance of Macro-regions;
- Last but not least, Andreas Kiefer, who was elected as Secretary General of the Congress two years ago and he successfully implemented the broad reform of the Congress.

As a result of this reform, one of the key new orientations of the Congress is on strengthening dialogue with national governments in order to overcome the existing problems and implement Congress recommendations for improving the situation. Here, too, Austria has been actively responding to our proposals. I welcome in particular the fact that your country has swiftly implemented two recommendations from the 2010 monitoring report of the Congress: on improving the social situation of mayors, and on facilitating intermunicipal co-operation across Länder borders. This legislation was adopted by your federal parliament only nine months later! This is exemplary!

In this regard, I would like to thank especially you, Minister Spindelegger, for the Austrian support of the Congress reform, and for defending the role of the Congress within the institutional architecture of the Council of Europe. Austria, together with Poland, Romania, Switzerland, Germany, France and some others, stood up to recent tendencies to put the Congress under the supervision of the intergovernmental sector and to take away its budgetary and administrative

autonomy. With the support of these countries, this idea was rejected by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe just a few weeks ago.

Indeed, local and regional democracy, territorial self-government, represented by strong regions and municipalities, is a landmark of European democratic development and of European identity. I therefore would like to thank those countries that supported the Congress for safeguarding this unique feature also institutionally, at European level.

Let me also thank you, Mr. Deputy Prime Minister Spindelegger, and Madam Minister of the Interior Mikl-Leitner, for supporting the Congress in establishing a European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma inclusion by seconding young Austrians from the "Austrian Service Abroad" (*NB: in German: Österreichischer Auslandsdienst*). This is a very promising start and we look forward to continuing this cooperation in a key area of the Council of Europe and of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speaking about diversity of our continent, we cannot but emphasise strong regional identities present in Europe today, which constitute the regional dimension of European identity or, rather, its multiple identities. The spectacular advance of regionalisation over the past decades was reflected first in the definition of the region and a variety of regional models, then in an increasing number of regions with legislative powers or with special status, institution of second chambers in national parliaments, adoption of the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages and, most recently, of the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy.

For us in the Congress, the multitude of regional identities, far from posing a threat to national unity, represents a source of strength and a chance of better addressing the specific needs of our pluri-cultural population. In fact, the historic experience shows that granting regional autonomy constitutes the best antidote against separatism. At the same time, diversity certainly presents a challenge of developing truly intercultural policies and relations in local and regional communities – a process for which grassroots authorities bear the primary and key responsibility.

Effectively, there is not a single State or large city left in Europe today that could claim to be mono-ethnic. This diversity requires new approaches and methods of community governance, learning about "the Other", getting to know other cultural identities, and ensuring a harmonious living together in dignity. At the same time, living together also means discovering your own self and knowing oneself, that is having an identity.

We are realising today that one common denominator that can engage all cultural groups in the work for the benefit of the entire community is genuine citizen participation in decision-making – participation that is at the same time effective (bringing about tangible results) and continued (not limited to periodic elections alone).

In addition, participation in community affairs, apart from engaging citizens of different cultural backgrounds in democracy, opens up great opportunities for their direct interaction and dialogue, bringing closer the ideal of an inclusive, intercultural community – while allowing everyone to assert their identity through participation. Thus, diversity itself comes forth as a driving force for participatory democracy, which we are seeking to build today.

This means that we – public authorities – need to find new ways of engaging citizens and providing for their better and more meaningful participation in democratic decision-making. We need a new model of continued citizen participation and feedback on public action, combining elements of direct democracy with the traditional system of representative democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These were also among the key messages of the report by the Group of Eminent Persons, set up by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and tasked with identifying the main challenges for European democracy. Entitled “Living together: Combining freedom and diversity in 21st Century Europe”, the report, which was published last year, put forward a set of policy recommendations and proposals for action.

The Eminent Persons have pointed out that the rising intolerance, xenophobia and discrimination are among the main threats to our living together, and stressed that towns and cities “bear the main responsibility for ensuring that culturally diverse societies are open societies, in which people belonging to different cultural groups [...] can feel at home and make their own contribution”.

It is also important that the Eminent Persons have specifically included among their recommendations for action the issues of participation of foreigners in local life and politics, as well as of integration of migrants and people of recent migrant origin. Responses to this challenge lie in reaching social consensus on the legal framework by which everyone has to abide; in ensuring equal treatment and equal protection of citizens’ rights – by, among other things, promoting local integration and access to social rights and public services for all, such as housing, education, health care and employment; as well as in fostering intercultural dialogue and harmonious relations between different cultural and

religious groups. These are tasks that cannot be addressed successfully by national governments alone. It is the regions, Länder, provinces, cities and municipalities and their elected politicians who do make this happen.

Specific action in this regard must include two major components.

One component is action to fight prejudice against migrants and raise public awareness of their cultures and contribution to the local community, in order to ensure non-discrimination and equality in human rights protection. In this regard, of particular importance are such issues as political discourse of elected representatives and public officials, portrayal of migrants in the media, and mediation between ethnic groups and the host community, among others.

The second component are measures to ensure equal access to social rights and public services, which may involve affirmative action and special efforts to remedy the inherent disadvantages, and which must include access to employment, access to education, access to housing, and access to health care, among others. There is a wide range of issues involved: evaluation of the existing skills and competences linked to issuing work permits, vocational training and professional education, language-learning, etc.

These measures, in turn, should be based on the broad foundation that includes, on the one hand, measures to promote active citizenship in local communities (education on national laws and local regulations, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, among others); and, on the other hand, interculturalism (local intercultural policies, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, etc.).

Given the growing diversity of European societies, the true challenge is to find ways of using this diversity for the benefit of the entire community, beginning from the grassroots. Building productive intercultural relations between population groups, ensuring integration of minority groups and bringing about better social cohesion are among today's main challenges for public authorities at all levels of governance, responses to which represent an integral part of participatory democracy. A key role in meeting this challenge belongs to local and regional authorities, as public action at the grassroots level has the most direct and tangible impact on our citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In summing up, let us ask ourselves: what creates an identity at local and regional level? I think strong municipalities and regions in themselves, that serve effectively the interests of their residents, with local and regional politicians who have an independent voice and are genuinely close to the citizens who uphold

their cultural traditions – these are the ingredients of the “identity mix”. However, at the same time, amidst this multitude of local and regional identities there is still a bond that links all of us together, a bond that makes you realise that Vienna, Prague, Zagreb or Cracow have something in common! This something is our common cultural heritage, which is especially felt here in “*Mitteleuropa*”, and upon which we build our common European identity: A European identity based on common values; an identity that comprises several levels which complement each other.

This phenomenon of several “layers” of identity goes well with the current discussion of multi level governance in Europe. Today, we witness the development of a system of co-operation and interaction, where all actors mutually respect the responsibilities and spheres of action of all stakeholders. In a political environment, where the different institutional levels of actors become more and more inter-dependent, multi-level-governance is the appropriate response to the challenges we are facing.

The issues of a European identity, of national and regional and local identities, of citizen participation and intercultural dialogue, of integration and diversity, of living together in dignity, will be only becoming more crucial in the future, along with European integration, disappearance of borders and engagement of European neighbours – in particular in the Southern Mediterranean and towards the South-East. These issues will certainly be on the table during the upcoming Austrian Chairmanship of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, which we look forward to commencing from November 2013 to May 2014. Preparations for this Presidency have already begun; the Congress is proud to be fully involved by Austria, and we look forward to taking up these challenges within the institutional architecture of our Organisation. A country, where citizens have and live these identities is well placed to address these issues when in the driving seat of the Council of Europe in just more than one year’s time.

But right now, I would like to thank once again the Forum organisers and to wish all of us inspiring and thought-provoking discussions.

Thank you.