

Opening address given by Claude Haegi (Strasbourg, 30 May 1995)

Caption: On 30 May 1995, Claude Haegi, President of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE), delivers the opening address at the Chamber's second session.

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Opening address given by Claude Haegi, President of the Chamber of Regions (30 May 1995)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are meeting today for the second session of the Chamber of Regions, which came into existence a year ago as a direct result of the reforms that led to the establishment of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe with its two separate Chambers for local and regional authorities respectively.

To start off the proceedings and your discussions at this second session, I should like to make a few comments about our Chamber's first year of existence and the direction of its future activities.

Twelve months of specific co-operation between regional authorities are not enough to allow for a definitive assessment of the first results, especially since regionalisation and the work of regional representatives have developed at their own pace in recent years, going beyond the scope of the Chamber of Regions in many areas.

Here, I am thinking for example of the improvement in the representation of the regions at the European Union, with the establishment of its new consultative body, the Committee of the Regions. At non-governmental level, I would mention the rapid growth of the Assembly of European Regions and the work of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions. On top of this, I would also mention the regionalisation process in our member countries and the strengthening of the role of regions in national structures.

Our regions have now found their place in national and European institutions and are more closely involved in the many different activities and initiatives concerning the building of a new Europe, encompassing our neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe who have already set up democratic structures at local authority level and are looking into the various aspects involved in setting up regional structures. We cannot but encourage them in this respect.

It is true that our work in the Congress and, more particularly, in the Chamber of Regions is to some extent dominated by this new co-operation and the effects of the rapprochement between the countries of Western Europe and those of Central and Eastern Europe. There is still, in fact, much scope for action by the Chamber of Regions in these areas. I myself have visited Ukraine and Siberia, while members of the Bureau have been in Moldova, Romania and Belarus to develop contacts and encourage the democratisation process at local and regional level.

In this connection, it gives me particular pleasure to welcome not only the new delegation from Latvia, the latest country to join the Council of Europe, but also the representatives of the countries which have applied for membership, such as Ukraine, Moldova, Croatia, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

The activities of the Chamber of Regions over the last twelve months can be presented under two heads:

1. the political aspects,
2. the more technical activities.

At political level, attention should be drawn to the great interest shown by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in the representation of the regions at the Council since the Congress was set up. There has been fruitful dialogue between the Presidents of our new body and the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, as well as with the relevant Assembly committee, and I should like to congratulate its representatives who are taking part in our work.

This dialogue has demonstrated the mutual interest in co-operation within the Council of Europe, and, as far as the programme of activities is concerned, there are many areas where we can, indeed, combine our efforts and co-operate in the preparation of major projects relating to fields such as regional planning and

transfrontier co-operation or, for instance, the Conference of Mediterranean Regions due to be held in September in Cyprus.

In general terms, contacts between the Council of Europe and the European Union have been stepped up. In our case, these contacts have focused on relations with the Committee of the Regions, many of whose members are also here today as representatives in our Chamber. It would be good if these relations could be further intensified and if joint projects could be carried out in areas of specific common interest.

The fact that an opinion from the Committee of the Regions is included in our programme for the discussion of the European Charter of Mountain Regions and will be presented here by the chair of our relevant committee is an encouraging sign of the possibilities that exist for co-operation and, where possible, for developing complementary political initiatives.

The Chamber of Regions will not succeed in its work without the support and direct involvement of regional authority representatives. We must therefore step up our dialogue with the regions. The possibilities for meeting for this purpose were limited in the past, which is why I took the initiative of proposing an informal meeting of the Chamber of Regions on 27 March, entitled "...".

This was the first time such a meeting had been held, and it produced some interesting thoughts and ideas which have been incorporated in the Report on Topical Issues, which I will have the honour of presenting during this session.

I intend continuing this exercise and calling another such meeting before the next session in order to take this dialogue further and establish clearer guidelines for our Chamber's future activities.

As far as our technical activities are concerned, it should first be noted that a number of working groups have been set up to replace the committees of the former Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe.

At present, there are some thirty working groups in the Congress: six come under the Chamber of Regions, seventeen are joint groups and the remainder come under the Chamber of Local Authorities.

The working groups of particular importance to our Chamber are as follows:

1. Working Group on the Rules of Procedure

This group has completed its work, and its rapporteur, Mr Starzacher, will present our Chamber's new draft rules of procedure later today. In future, we will therefore have an important tool for effective and more transparent work.

2. Working Group on the European Charter of Regional Self-Government

Given the significance of the European Charter of Local Self-Government as a key standard-setting text for the establishment of grassroots democracy, there is no need to stress the importance that should be attached to the preparation of this particular draft charter, which we hope will also become a standard-setting international instrument for the establishment of regional structures in our member countries.

Mr Rabe, the group's rapporteur, will be presenting a brief report on the current state of progress.

3. Working Group on "Political and Economic East/West Co-operation"

Lastly, I should like to mention the work of the group responsible for promoting East/West political and economic co-operation, which will be organising the first East/West Economic Forum of the Regions of Europe, due to be held in Geneva at the beginning of next year.

I have confined myself to these three key areas. Other activities are described in greater detail in the documents distributed.

* * *

I should like to conclude with a few comments on the problems we have encountered.

One subject which keeps coming up is the administrative definition of regional entities or regions.

This was discussed at our informal meeting in March. It is covered in the report by Mr Pinto, from the Parliamentary Assembly, and has been underlying the discussions in the Bureau about the representativeness of the national delegations in our Chamber.

In my view, we should not be too narrow-minded here at present, as administrative structures in Europe are still evolving and there is no single model that can be imposed.

In this connection, I would quote Denis de Rougemont's view that the ideal region should consist of a cluster of communities which decide to join together in running an area of human dimensions. Very few of today's regions correspond to this definition. Nevertheless, they do offer interesting opportunities for development to meet the daily needs of our continent's citizens.

I believe that the drafting of a Charter of Regional Self-Government should help guide us in these discussions in future.

My second comment here concerns the question of mobilising the regional representatives in the Chamber so as to involve them more closely in our work. We need to inject political momentum into our assembly in order to meet the objectives it was set up to achieve.

I would therefore appeal to all members to participate more actively in our various activities, to let us know what direction they think our future work should take and to play an active part in all our Chamber's projects so as to foster exchanges of experience and information in their respective fields. This will enable regions to play a part, at our level and through the structures now offered to us by the Council of Europe, in finding solutions to the major challenges which will face our democratic society in the years ahead.