Keynote speech of Ms. Maja Riniker, President of the National Council of Switzerland, in Session II of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments:
Closer to voters: regionalism in Europe, and safeguarding Europe's cultural identity
(Hungarian Parliament – 12 May 2025)

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I look around this room, I see many faces, each shaped by different histories, shaped by different places. Walking through the halls of the Hungarian Parliament earlier today, I heard a variety of languages, I encountered many viewpoints. And yet, here we are, gathered in one room.

The list of participants of this high-level conference distinguishes between member states, candidate countries & guests. As you know, Switzerland belongs to the third category. When the Hungarian hosts invited me to speak in this session, I asked myself: *What can a guest contribute to this conversation? What can Switzerland's experience offer to our exchange? And what can we learn from one another?*

The title of this session invites us to reflect on some fundamental questions about the definition of regions and the aspects of culture or identity.

These are not just philosophical questions. They are political ones. Because how we answer them determines how we govern, how we live together, and how we respond to the concerns and needs of our populations.

Switzerland does not claim to offer a perfect model. But as a country that has long navigated the realities of linguistic, cultural and regional diversity, we may have some experiences to share.

Let me highlight **three insights** from the Swiss experience that might contribute to our discussion.

First: In Switzerland, we believe that trust begins locally.

Switzerland is a direct democracy. This means our citizens not only elect their representatives, but they also vote on legislation, decide on concrete policy issues, and can propose amendments to the Federal Constitution through popular initiatives.

This right to participate comes with responsibility: four times a year, Swiss voters go to the ballot box to decide on a wide range of issues – from national questions such as the introduction of a 13th monthly pension payment (approved in March 2024) to local matters like building a new hospital in their community or the adjusting the tax rate and budget of their municipality.

Importantly, direct democracy is not limited to the national level. It also takes place at the cantonal and communal levels. And as I said, it goes far beyond electing local officials.

I am convinced that when people have a real say in shaping their immediate environment – in their hometown, in their community – politics is no longer an abstract concept, and they are more likely to get involved. And they are more likely to trust the democratic process.

Second: Cultural diversity is not an obstacle — it is a foundation. Switzerland is a country of four national languages, strong regional identities and diverse cultural traditions. And yet, our democracy functions. Why? Because our **federalist institutions** are built to give regions a voice.
We do not try to overcome our differences; we build on them.

That is why Switzerland is often described as a *Willensnation*: a nation held together not by linguistic or cultural uniformity, but by shared political will. What unites us is not sameness, but our commitment to work together, despite our differences.

That's why, under my presidency of the National Council this year, I have chosen the motto: **"Cohesion through diversity."**

This is more than a slogan. It is a principle, one that defines the Swiss model: decentralised power through federalism, strong regional autonomy, and a deep trust in citizens. In our view, democracy should not trickle down from above, it should rise from below.

Third: Cooperation matters. Switzerland may not be a member of the European Union, but we are no stranger to Europe. Quite the opposite: we benefit from strong bilateral relations, and we are deeply connected — politically, economically, culturally.

To conclude, let me return to the idea: "Cohesion through diversity." To me, this expresses what modern democracy should aim for: inclusion, dialogue, and respect for difference — not as an end in itself, but as a condition for finding common ground.

This principle guides how Switzerland functions today. And how we prepare for tomorrow. It reminds us to remain open, to listen, and to adapt. All while staying true to what makes each community distinct.

Europe, like Switzerland, is not a monolith. It is a mosaic, composed of many languages, traditions and institutions. And this diversity is not a weakness. It is a resource. Europe's strength lies in its ability to maintain unity through shared principles: democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.

In uncertain times, marked by war, disinformation and polarisation, these shared foundations become even more important. But unity must never come at the expense of regional voices and cultural richness. It must *include* them.

If you ever visit the Federal Palace in Bern, look up in the entrance hall. There you will see the coats of arms of all our cantons surrounding the words:

"Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno" – "One for all, all for one."

This is more than a historical reference. It is a reminder that shared responsibility and solidarity are essential to any democratic project.

And perhaps it is also a reminder of the kind of Europe we want to see.

Thank you.