

Speech of the President of the Congress Gudrun Mosler-Törnström

Conference “Public policies, democracy, rights and transparency in local governments”

7 June 2017, Piraeus Municipal theatre, Athens

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for inviting the Congress of the Council of Europe to this conference and to pay tribute to Jean-Claude FRECON, former President of the Congress who was, as you know, a friend of Greece.

Jean-Claude FRECON was here in Athens less than one year ago, in September 2016, at your invitation, Ms DOUROU. Together with a Congress delegation he visited refugee camps in ELAIONAS and SKARAMAGAS and the logistic centre). He wanted to better understand the situation that you have to face, as Governor of Attica region, and that Greece as a whole is facing. This visit helped him and the rapporteurs to better focus the Congress action on the needs of the migrants and on the needs of the politicians, administrations and the indispensable civil society in the regions, cities and municipalities as regards the reception and integration of migrants and the role of local and regional authorities in this respect. He was a devoted supporter of Greek local and

regional authorities and I would like to quote him when he addressed the members of KEDE (the Central Union of Greek municipalities) in September 2016.

He highlighted that “the Congress of the Council of Europe will mobilise its modest but determined forces to convince governments of our member States about the burning need to fulfill the obligation to gather all European territorial communities to lighten your load, notably by welcoming, where it is possible, families of refugees with the aim of integrating them. Your country has no vocation to become a huge refugee camp”, he said.

Jean-Claude FRECON chose strong and sincere words when he talked about the situation in Greece. So I would like to thank you again, Ms DOUROU, for allowing us to pay tribute to him again, and by doing so, to enable us to keep him in our memories and in our hearts.

I can assure you today that as President of the Congress, I will do my best to follow Jean-Claude FRECON’s footsteps and invest all my energy and my determination as regards the situation of local and regional democracy in your country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 2014, the Congress carried out two monitoring visits to assess the situation of local and regional democracy in Greece in the light of the European Charter on Local Self-Government. This Charter was ratified by Greece already in 1989.

At that time, I was co-rapporteur on regional democracy in Greece, so I conducted the monitoring visits and of course presented the report which was then adopted by the Congress in 2015.

In the meantime, my position has changed. But as you can see, I am still very committed to local and regional democracy in Greece. In my past capacities as regional rapporteur and former President of the Chamber of regions of the Congress, I paid a particular interest to the regional issues.

My first surprise - so to say – was, when I discovered that the Greek ratification law of the European Charter on Local Self-Government explicitly excluded the regional level from the scope of application of that Treaty. According to Article 2 of the ratification Law (1850/1989), in Greece the Charter does not concern the second tier of local government. At that time, the Greek regions were branches of central government, they were “deconcentrated” State bodies, which could explain this restrictive declaration when the Greek authorities ratified the European Charter.

Today, in 2017, however the territorial structure of Greece has changed. The Kallikratis reform redefined the first and second level local authorities mentioned in the

Constitution – at present the municipalities and the regions – and changed their territorial structures, their basic organization, their competences, the financial system, the supervision by the State and the introduction of elections to regional assemblies.

Greek regions play a role in the decentralisation process as they are the seat of the former prefectural administrations' services and they contribute to the provision of services to citizens. Regions are responsible for planning and implementing the government's regional policies in the areas of the regional responsibilities.

Especially, as we underlined in the Congress report on Greece, responsibilities on the planning and development, as well as responsibilities of administrative and management nature, have been transferred to the responsibility of the elected bodies of the regions, as the Managing Authorities for the Regional Operational Programmes and the Regional Development Funds have been placed under the regions. As second tier local governments, the new regions (as of 2011 after the entry into force of the Kallikratis reform) take over important responsibilities with regard to economic and regional development.

The regions design, plan and implement their own regional policies within the context of their competencies, according to the principles of transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. Regions exercise their competences within the framework of the relevant laws and administrative regulations, in a number of fields.

It goes without saying that Greek regions must have the means to pursue their policies, and to deliver their services. I am not referring to financial means only, but to a general autonomy, that is to say enlarged competences and responsibilities. Greece needs strong policies of regions. What does it mean? It means that on the one hand, Greece needs a strong regional policy of the European Union and of the Greek government. On the other hand, Greece also needs an own policy of the regions to design legal and political framework and to provide each regions with a political weight. And these strong policies of regions are necessary to make a reality of this tier of government which should also benefit from the rights provided by the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

In its recommendation, the Congress called on the Greek authorities to extend the scope of the Charter to the second tier of local government, namely the regions, by amending the existing legislation. After the Kallikratis reform, no doubts remain as to their status as democratic and accountable self-government authorities

In our monitoring report we stressed that the Greek regions lack regulatory powers and do not have powers of self-organisation; they can only establish their own organisational chart and define internal rules for their own administration, but within a framework that is set by national laws, which tend to be quite extensive and standardise even secondary matters of details of administrative actions.

Yet the Greek constitution provides quite detailed provisions which contain regulations on local government and which should also apply to the regional level.

More than ever when Greek municipalities and regions have to face with burning challenges (such as the refugee crisis) these two tiers of government should have tailored competences and concomitant resources in order to achieve their respective policies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recently the Congress introduced a new procedure, known as the post-monitoring procedure. This follow-up to the monitoring report consists of political dialogue of national, regional and local authorities with the Congress, in order to develop and to agree on a timeline to implement the Congress recommendations for that country.

I must say that we have a very good cooperation with the national authorities and a very good dialogue. This year I had the privilege to meet the President of the Hellenic republic Mr. Prokopis PAVLOPOULOS twice; once in Strasbourg and once in Athens just two weeks ago. He supports the proposals of the Congress to develop local and regional democracy in Greece further and finds it relevant to work on the basis of the know-how provided by the Congress. The Minister of Interior, Panos SKOURLETIS, was at the Council of Europe premises in Strasbourg two weeks ago. This also

demonstrates the close working relationships between Greek authorities and the Council of Europe.

So I trust that we will have a fruitful post-monitoring dialogue, which I hope will lead to the incorporation of the regional level into the scope of application of the Charter and thus to the strengthening of policies of the regions in Greece, in order to better serve the needs of the citizens... which is - at the end of the day- the final objective of such policies.

This is exactly what we are resolutely working on today at the Congress, hand in hand with the Greek authorities.

Thank you for your attention.