

32nd Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities – 28-30 March 2017 - Local democracy in Malta

## Speech by the Karim Van OVERMEIRE, rapporteur, Belgium, NR

29 March 2017

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to present to you today together with the co-rapporteur, Mr Artur TORRES PEREIRA the draft recommendation and the report on local and regional democracy in Finland, which were approved by the Monitoring Committee at its last meeting in February.

I will start by a short presentation of the visit and then I will focus on the regional aspects of our report in my quality as rapporteur on regional democracy. My colleague Mr Artur TORRES PEREIRA as rapporteur on local democracy will be pleased to make a presentation of local aspects.

So, the monitoring visit to review the state of local and regional democracy in Finland took place from 17 to 19 May 2016. Our delegation was accompanied by Mr Nikos CHLEPAS as expert, whom I would like to thank very much on behalf of the monitoring delegation for his excellent work.

We arrived in Finland just when the governmental coalition disclosed the details of a planned in-depth reform of local government, healthcare and social welfare system.

Our delegation discussed topical issues with all our interlocutors, Mayors, Deputy Mayors and councillors from the cities of Helsinki and Lahti as well as Salo and Raasepori. We met regional representatives from Pajjat-Hame and the Governor of [Åland](#) islands. We also had a meeting with the Finnish Delegation to the Congress and the highest representatives of the Association of Local and Regional Local Authorities.

We had a high-level meeting with Mr Jari PARTANEN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Local Government and Public Reforms whom I would like to welcome today here in the Congress on behalf of our delegation.

I invite you to have a look at the programme of our visit attached to the report.

I would like to thank the Finnish Delegation to the Congress and the Permanent Representation of Finland to the Council of Europe for their valuable contribution to the preparation of the visit. My thanks also go to Mr Heikki Telakivi, Secretary of the Delegation. Moreover, I wish to thank all the authorities that participated in the consultation phase and helped us to refine our report and conclusions.

This was the third monitoring visit to Finland. The previous one took place in 2010 and resulted in the adoption of Recommendation 311 (2011) which raised five points of concern with regard to local and regional democracy in the country.

Meanwhile, I need to stress that Finland has always enjoyed a very high level of local autonomy deeply rooted in its history.

Furthermore, my co-rapporteur and I have to acknowledge a steady progress in this field. Finland has fulfilled at least partially the previous Congress recommendations.

We are particularly satisfied with the initiative taken by the Finnish authorities to foster decentralization through the creation of a second tier of local government on a regional level.

In the meantime, we could not but notice a rather ambiguous stance taken by the Finnish Government in respect to the regional reform.

We have therefore concerns about the nature of the regional entities to be practically established in 2019 and in particular the possibility of the application of the Charter in their respect.

The constitutional basis for this new tier of local self-government seems rather weak to be able to provide for genuine regional self-government entities, in particular with regard to their right to levy taxes and dispose of own resources.

Therefore, we call upon the Finnish authorities to ensure that new regional authorities have freedom of action with regard to their own resources and the use of future state grants.

Furthermore - and I would like to conclude by particularly highlighting this point – we hope that in the context of the regional government reform the application of the Charter will be extended implicitly or explicitly to the new regional entities.

I am pleased now to give the floor to my co-rapporteur Mr Artur TORRES PEREIRA.

Thank you for your attention.