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Address by Jari Partanen, State Secretary of Transport and Communications of Finland, on behalf of the President of the Committee of Ministers

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Strasbourg, France, 3 April 2018

Dear President, Distinguished members of the Congress, dear friends at the Council of Europe, ladies and gentlemen,

Finland has the great honour of holding the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe as the Council celebrates its 70th anniversary. In addition to highlighting the importance of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, Finland's Presidency focuses on a variety of very topical themes, ensuring that the most vulnerable people's voices are heard.

Finland's Presidency term comes at a challenging time, as the Organisation is facing the greatest political, economic and institutional challenges in its history. This spring will also see the election of a new Secretary General of the Council of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will make the final decision on the new Secretary General in June. Finland's Presidency comes at a time of continued discussions on a reform process, which concern the future of the entire organisation and its role in the face of coming challenges. As expected, Finland's Presidency has been busy, and the challenges facing the organisation have not been minor. Before addressing these, I would like to say a few words about the Finland's priorities during its Presidency term.

The first priority of our term as President of the Committee of Ministers is strengthening the system of human rights and the rule of law in Europe. We believe that in our current situation, it is extremely important to emphasise the significance of universal human rights and a

multilateral, rule-based system throughout Europe. These rights are also a manifestation of European values.

Our second priority is gender equality and women's rights, which are one of Finland's most important long-term political priorities, both within the Council of Europe and in other fora. Gender equality has been an integral element in Finland's own success story, through many difficulties.

Our third priority is openness and inclusion, as well as focusing on young people and preventing radicalisation. A free, active civil society and freedoms of expression, assembly and association are the cornerstones of a democratic society.

Finland is committed to preventing violent extremism and radicalisation. Focusing on youth, preventing marginalisation and promoting non-discrimination are the most important tools needed in this work.

We must all work together to ensure that the Council of Europe and its core work on behalf of human rights, democracy and the rule of law can continue in the future, despite the reform process and the other challenges we face.

I would also like to return to a question that touches us all – the political crisis in the Council of Europe. In its Presidency, Finland has worked actively with all Member States and the Parliamentary Assembly to come up with solutions. Resolving the situation requires flexibility on behalf of everyone involved. All member States must fulfil their membership obligations, including paying the membership fees. The situation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine cannot be ignored. I recall the Committee of Ministers' commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders. The basic principle of the European security, international law and respect for territorial integrity of all countries must be defended.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Membership in the Council of Europe, now approaching its 70th anniversary, is a matter of great importance for Finland. Enacting the European Charter on Local Self-Government was also a practical matter for our country. Its impact can still be seen in Finland's Local Government Act. One of the aims of our Local Government Act is to give municipalities significant financial room to manoeuvre: the right to decide on their own tax rates, take out loans and manage their accounts have been self-evident for us. The Local Government Act

has been updated continuously as the world grows more complex. However, the structure of the Act is clear, and along with our legislative drafting process and administration more generally, it can be used as an example in international situations, as has been stated by the OECD, among others.

I am proud to say that Finland was one of the very first countries in the world to guarantee women's right to vote. We place great importance on the safety and security of everyone in our country and on their wide-ranging rights to participate in the country's development.

I know that the Congress has been closely monitoring Finland's recent efforts with regard to our regional government, health and social services reform. I had the pleasure of giving you an outline picture of the reform a couple of years ago. Finland is an unusual country from a governance point of view, as it does not have the kind of clear regional administration that is common in Central Europe. In Finland, the municipal and state levels divide intermediate-level administrative duties in a uniquely complex manner. When the Congress assessed the reform as part of Finland's public governance review, one of the most important questions concerned the right of counties to levy taxes. I agree that this question is very important.

As you are all aware, the most important reform in Finland's history had to be put on hold. We did not have enough time for all questions linked with our Constitution and that led to a lack of sufficient political support in Parliament. As a result, the Government resigned and is now functioning on a caretaker basis. The headwinds faced by the reform provide a good picture of changes in the political landscape: in today's world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to form a political consensus. This can also be seen outside of Finland. The Council of Europe is an organisation that has been actively monitoring the development of democracy, and it has not shied away from tackling difficult subjects. This is great and admirable. It is important for the Organisation to promote continuity in a world that is sometimes swayed very strongly by political winds.

The new Finnish Government, to be appointed after the elections in April, will inherit the task of reorganising healthcare and social services. Our country's population is ageing, and we need to focus strongly on financing, services and the integration of migrants into society. We also need technological reform. This could be seen during Finland's Presidency at the Artificial

Intelligence conference, for example. However, focusing on technological development must not come at the expense of ensuring that our traditional tools continue to function well.

The world is changing, and we must be able to implement reforms without becoming discouraged by the challenges we face. Stronger involvement of citizens and building trust are an important part of implementing reforms, and in this respect, the Council of Europe plays a key role. In the long term, hearing the voices of citizens can also lead to surprising cost savings and increased efficiency.

The Congress has acknowledged the need for reform to deal with an ageing population and guarantee access to services in all corners of the country. In terms of its ageing development, Finland is the Japan of Europe: the ageing population presents a challenge, but also an opportunity. Addressing these matters is very important for our country, not only within the framework of the Council of Europe, but also with other international organisations. Because all member States are facing these challenges, it is important for as many member States as possible to participate in this work. Democracy, human rights and advancing the participation of the most vulnerable people in society should be in the interest of as many of us as possible: I am proud of Finland's Presidency programme and its focus on these core issues.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Finland, democratic local governance has had a stabilising role and function in our society for decades. It is important to keep this in mind when we consider the difficulties faced by many traditionally revered western states today.

When representatives from the Congress observed Finland's municipal elections in 2017, they were pleased with what they saw. I think it a great thing that the functioning of democracy in all member States is also tested by external parties. We are used to thinking that democracy is the same thing as having democratic elections and the right to vote.

A municipality can be strong if its democracy is strong. And by democracy, I mean representative democracy, user democracy and citizen participation in the broadest sense. We can engage residents through both new and traditional means. New means emerging alongside the existing ones include client panels, electronic applications and measures taking

into account the mobility of people. French President Macron has just wrapped up his comprehensive round of town hall meetings. This kind of mobilisation on the part of decision-makers is beneficial, as it increases dialogue, builds trust and offers opportunities to seek out strengths and new confidence at the regional and local levels.

A functional representative system is also very important. Finland has been cautious when it comes to adopting electronic voting methods, but we have quietly implemented an electronic electoral roll system, which has already been tested in several elections. Increasing the voter turnout rate has been a challenge in Finland, just like in many other countries. We need candidates from different ages and gender with a variety of different backgrounds.

In Finland, a well-functioning democracy is becoming more and more connected to economic parameters. Democracy and the economy must work with each other, not against each other. I feel we should revive cooperation between the Council of Europe member States and organisations concerning local government finances. One new theme of this work could be *Means to balance local government finances*. A more efficient economy, in terms of both the central government and local administration, is in the interest of all member States. It is very important to exchange information with other member States in the most practical, hands-on way possible.

The Council of Europe worked as a moderator during the last reform of our Local Government Act. At the Ministry of Finance, there was a fruitful exchange of experiences with a few member States concerning regulation to ensure sufficient financing. I feel there could be more peer-learning between member States, in addition to traditional recommendations, conventions and guidelines for preparatory working groups.

Going forward, I believe that we must focus more on how to implement digitalisation throughout the public sector. And not only within the public sector, but also in cooperation with businesses and non-governmental organisations. We must develop the public sector, the state, regions and municipalities so that they function as well as possible.

It is unfortunate that financial questions connected to the Council of Europe have been so challenging in recent years. I hope we can regain a more stable footing in this respect so as not to jeopardise the important work of the Organisation. The financial crisis can also have positive effects if it guides us to engage in stronger cooperation and focus more closely on the

important questions we face, without forgetting the significance of a practical approach. Focusing on the most important issues will likely be in the interest of all member States.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that through strong cooperation within the Council of Europe, we can promote the wellbeing of people throughout Europe.

I wish you success in your important work on behalf of your local communities and regions.