

**44th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - Strasbourg, France, 21 - 23 March 2023**

## Speech of Konstantinos KOUKAS, Mayor of Mykonos, Greece

*Check against delivery*

### **Debate on "Direct election of mayors"**

22 March 2023

Dear Members,

Thank you, President, for inviting me to take the floor on a topic that is important to us, in Greece.

I have been elected directly to this position twice by the citizens of my Island, Mykonos, in 2014 and 2019 and it is very important to participate today in this interesting discussion. The direct election of Mayors by the electoral body is a pivotal issue for all of us serving our Municipalities and local administration structures in general, taking into consideration both the advantages as well as the difficulties that stem from this process.

In our European family, what we observe apart from the variety in how local governments and Municipal Councils are elected, is that the election of Mayors is either direct from the electoral bodies or indirect by appointment through a collective representative body. Both ways of election have a strong argumentation for and against, based mainly on specific characteristics of each society. In any case, what we should bear in mind is the following two prerequisites: first, the process of electing a Mayor should secure his legitimacy. In this case, the Mayor can implement his program during his mandate. Second, this process should be fully operational, in order to secure the proper functioning of the collective bodies and the necessary majority within the Municipal Councils. In this way, the Mayor secures the competent decisions for the implementation of programs and initiatives for the benefit of the citizens.

I am sure that from the systems already presented so far and the upcoming dialogue, we will get useful information on best practices in each country. In this context I would like to present here my own experience on the system that is being applied in Greece.

As you know I am the Mayor of an insular Municipality, the island of Mykonos, with special characteristics, as well as a great contribution in the Greek economy, as Mykonos is the most visited touristic destination in the Mediterranean.

In 2010, when we had a major change in the Greek local administration law, there was a transfer of responsibilities to Municipalities and Regions. At that point, the direct election of Mayors by the electoral body was retained. The election was secured after the first voting round in the case one candidate gets the ultimate majority requested by the law or after the second voting round between the two candidates who have gathered most votes.

It is obvious that in this way the legitimacy of each Mayor is empowered. This is due to the direct election from the citizens that ends to the empowerment of the Mayor within the Municipal Council as well as within his/her own political party.

However, in practice the implementation of each plan should be secured by the necessary majority within the Municipal Council. This has been proven a fundamental element not only in making decisions but also in implementing the relevant strategies.

To get more concrete, after the 2018 reform we have confronted serious problems relating to decision making procedure and voting on crucial political issues within the Municipal Councils. The Government at the time had decided to retain the election of the Mayor by the electoral body, applying the system of proportional representation on the basis of the first-round results.

In this framework, what we have experienced is destabilization since the majority of Mayors directly elected by the electoral body in 2019 have been left with a limited number of seats within the Municipal Council. This resulted in a continuous debate among parties that quite often leads to a deadlock in taking decisions even for the most crucial issues in terms of the operation of a Municipality.

Thus, for the first time in decades the elected Mayor did not have the majority in the Municipal Council in some 230 out of 332 Municipalities in the country. As a result, he/she couldn't enforce the program for which he/she was elected by the citizens.

Let me present an example. It is the case of Thessaloniki Municipality. The Mayor was elected in Thessaloniki after the by-election round with a high percentage of 66.8% but only had 7 out of the 49 seats of the Municipal Council. Not to mention that in the first round of elections, 16 different parties participated, 9 of them receiving between 1% and 2%. All the above created a strange nongovernmental regime, where in many cases the cost of intolerance among the parties in the Municipal Council was paid by the citizens.

The scenery has changed in 2021, where a new law was launched by the current government. The forthcoming election of October 2023 will run with the new electoral system of plurality representation. This new system retains the direct vote of mayors securing a clear and secure mandate. In this way the Mayor is elected in the first round with 43% securing the 3/5 of the Municipal Council seats and has an empowered position that allows the planning and implementation of a long-term strategy.

This type of election creates a strong bond based on the trust that the electoral body had developed with the upcoming mayor, We are the elected mayors that represent and serve the best interests of our citizens throughout our mandate. We decide our own future as a local community. In my mind, our election based on a clear and secure mandate, reinforces municipal leadership and the stability of local government.

In addition, the direct election of mayors in Greece helps the citizens feeling more involved in the management of local affairs when they choose the person, who is believed to have the ability of giving practical and concrete answers to their problems. It is an ongoing process and puts more responsibility in the hands of the voters.

At a time where democracy is severely challenged, I think this system is in favour of local affairs that are not overshadowed by national or political issues. Voters are given an important role in local decision making procedure and they participate in a more effective way in local politics.

Besides, the conditions for being a candidate are not too demanding in Greece, so that running for a first mandate is comparatively easy for every citizen.

To sum up, I strongly believe that despite any issues we had in the Greek local administration in the past due to the local administration electoral system, the current system to be enforced allows not only for the direct voting of the Mayors by the electoral body but also responds in the best way to the democratic participation of the citizens of Europe.

Needless to say, for the efficiency of this method, a proper legal framework should be designed. This will allow the leading party to have adequate majority in the Municipal Council and the Mayor to implement the directives and program, bearing an open dialogue with all parties in the Municipal Council.

Finally, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to present to you my experience from the Greek reality. I am positive that in the dialogue we will have later at this session, we will all acquire important information that will assist us in the better delivery of services to the citizen and local societies.

Thank you.