

Speech of the Greek Minister of the Interior, Panos Skourletis,  
European Committee on Democracy and Governance

Mr. Minister

Honorable representatives of the member states of the Council of Europe

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Ladies and gentlemen

Today, on behalf of the Greek Government, I would like to share thoughts and ideas about the strengthening of democracy at local and regional level, the democratic challenges of the European superstructure and the global values and principles in whose name we make decisions that may affect millions of people.

However, before referring to what we plan to do at the level of local and regional government, by reviewing the institutional framework of Local Government and before explaining the reasons that push us towards these changes, allow me:

- to thank Cyprus for its impeccable response to the duties of the presidency of the Committee of Ministers, which is to be completed this month
- to wish the Czech Republic, which assumes this responsibility until next November, a productive mandate.

The demands remain high and what we achieve at the level of the Council of Europe strengthens the foundations of the European ideal, which remains attractive and a reference point for both the peoples of Europe and of the wider world.

This assumption, which I believe is shared in general, about the global influence of Europe's efforts over the last decades to evolve from a world of conflict to a model of peace, stability, social progress and economic cooperation, leads me to the following points.

It is a historic challenge for both the European Institutions and the peoples of Europe, in particular, to respond to the widespread challenge of the current political and institutional status quo. This challenge, with political characteristics that are still evolving, is developing within the deadlocks of the current political and institutional status quo, deadlocks defined by the breadth and social impact of the ongoing crisis.

Faced with this multifaceted crisis of recent years - economic, social, political - the usual answers seem to exacerbate its key features, reproduce deadlocks and fuel controversies that are not always political.

This is largely a crisis of the political model of governance and the development model. The policy change into technocratic management was delimited by the theories of self-regulation of the economy, the political priorities of imposing the principles of economic competition, the engineering of austerity.

The terms 'metapolitics', 'post-democracy', describe the isolation of politics, with its antagonisms and its consensus, from its social components, the relations of social contrasts and needs. They fuel the phenomena of the crisis of representation and depreciation of the political institutions, which constitute a reflection of:

- the systematic weakening of citizen participation,
- the compression and distortion of social and individual rights,
- the increase of social inequalities and discrimination.

While the shell of formal democratic institutions remains more or less unchanged, governance is altered and controlled by coalitions of economic/corporate interests, self-referential technocrats-experts and financial sanctuaries autonomous from the body of society, that manipulate the social majority and transform the widening social inequalities into a rule.

At the same time, the rhetoric of hate and racism, finding institutional expression through far-right political constructs, is bred by the systematic denial of expectations for a dignified life. The decline of democratic principles over the priorities of economic competition prepares the ground for the arena of violent extermination of the "other". A dark morality is emerging that prefers the deletion of the common European post-war acquis of rule of law, deleting all forms of diversity - gender, race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs - to build an equally dark "fortress" Europe.

Responses are therefore required, alternative policies that renew our common progressive European tradition; the tradition of the rule of law, political competition between political and social institutions of representation in the field of democratic regulation and settlement of social inequalities, tensions, demands and visions.

Conversion of the challenge of the current status quo into socially viable alternative policies has as a fundamental prerequisite the re-establishment of the Republic.

Europe never has and never needed a "multi-read" democracy, where answers to questions of absolute necessity concerning the multidimensional crisis vary according to who asks and when he addresses the question.

Europe, with the contribution of all of us, has to demand a democratic model that will respond clearly to the needs of many and guarantee the future in terms of uninterrupted social cohesion and economic progress.

Europe does not need a new Middle Ages, Europe is "thirsty" for its social, intellectual and economic rebirth. I sincerely believe that the conditions for this are directly related to our discussion here, to the possibilities that we can create and exploit.

We refuse, therefore, the democracy of those solid economic indicators that neither reflect the real economy and actual output nor the social reality. And it utterly misleads whoever believes that this choice can ensure long-term profitability and growth, so that in the future we can talk again about what has been left aside in the name of the circumstances.

Our choice is the democracy of development and diffusion of economic prosperity, social participation, development of intellectual values and principles of sustained progress in searching for the new that we all need in this, indeed, transition period with challenges that go beyond the borders of Europe. On this basis, we want a dynamic transformation in order for every European citizen to progress from being a "consumer" of democracy to being a "producer" of democracy.

This in turn leads us to the need for a first review of the existing institutional framework for Local Government in Greece. Because, if Europe is the "body", every local society is the "cell" which has to reflect - if any - our sustained progress on the level of the structures of the social organisation.

The debate in Greece has begun already in the summer of 2016, with a structured, institutionalised dialogue between the Local Authorities of first and second tiers, the employees, experts and administrative officers of the competent Directorates of the Ministry of Interior. The consultation was completed several months later and was reproduced in a text of 445 pages in which we have gathered common observations, agreements, disagreements, different perspectives, common interpretations. It is a valuable aid for the next phase of the procedure, the processing of our proposals, the consultation on them and the final formulation of our legislative proposal.

Allow me, before I become more specific, to the extent that I can during this ongoing process, to point out that some of the key questions we have been asked to answer in the context of this procedure of dialogue and assessment of the need for change, are related to the level of operation and the degree of resolution of local government problems in Greece. What changes are needed in the existing framework, changes that aspire to be a democratic breakthrough in the field of self-government?

In Greece, the area of Self-Government has a history in terms of both its political constitution and its relations with the central state. The real terms of political representation of local societies differed significantly from the constraints of the central political scene, objectively creating a competitive relationship between Self-government and Governments.

The post-conflict formulation of Self-Government in Greece is characterised by its over-centralised, customer-oriented political-administrative system, in which self-governing institutions have a secondary and limited role in public affairs. In spite of the general constitutional imperative of the administrative and financial autonomy of Self-Government and

the presumption of competence for the administration of local affairs, their legislative implementation preached the political control of Self-Government with the fragmented distribution of competences, the disciplining through the arbitrary fluctuation of regular financial grants as well as the democratic deficit in the election and constitution of the collective bodies.

It is characteristic of the reticence of the previous political system, the late institutionalisation of the second tier of Self-Government: in 1994 at prefectural level and in 2010 at regional level.

Ladies and gentlemen

The last institutional intervention, the "Kallikratis" program, has not met expectations and did not achieve its goals.

It was not accompanied by a radical change in the political and administrative system of the new enlarged municipalities, with the result that centralisation and reduced accessibility of the citizen to decision-making processes remain dominant.

The municipal government system has not changed, and we have maintained the undemocratic electoral system.

Any "economies of scale" that were created this period, within the framework of tough monetary fiscal adjustment policies, eventually came to the detriment of the local government, its human resources and its operation.

There has been a one-dimensional approach to the spatial restructuring of municipalities on the basis of a reduction in the number of local government units, without paying sufficient attention to local spatial, social and economic specificities. There are particular problems in island regions and disadvantaged mountain areas.

Excessive restrictions on the supervisory and control procedures imposed as a result of the crisis have significantly undermined the freedom of local authorities. A factor contributing to bureaucracy was the unclear distribution of competences between different levels of local government and central state institutions.

Extensive scrutiny, the lack of adequate funding for the duties assigned to local administrations, unclear responsibilities between public bodies at various levels and regulatory instability do not contribute to the consistent planning of local development and to the reduction of the development potential of local communities.

The government's reform initiative aspires to be a radical reformulation of the area of self-government. The way of overcoming the fierce mechanism of the guardianship, defined by the country's memorandum commitments and the return to European regularity, requires structural reforms to re-establish the Democratic constitution of Self-Government, its social and developmental role.

For our government, Self-Government must be an autonomous institution of political democracy, within our unified political-administrative system, with a role of guarantor of social goods and democratic expression, with exclusive competences on the scale of locality and guaranteed public resources.

It is a local authority which must act on behalf of its citizens. It must have an autonomous role in shaping daily politics and priorities for its area of responsibility, a role based on a universal policy of decentralisation, decision making and resources at the closest to the citizen level.

There is a need to specify and legally enforce, by implementing constitutional requirements, the "presumption of competence" for local and supra-local affairs, and the principles of:

- proximity, with which the administration is exercised as close as possible to the citizen
- subsidiarity, with regard to the allocation of administrative competences, where the highest level of public administration only exercises those administrative powers that the lower tier cannot effectively exercise
- local autonomy, where each level of self-government must operate in full independence.

Our intervention, which we are seeking to conclude in 2017, will be distinguished by significant breakthroughs, but also by shaping the possibilities of an overall approach later on. The main axes for the modernisation and reform of the overall institutional framework for the organisation and operation of the Local Government are:

- Redefining the distribution of competences between the two tiers of self-government and the state / Review of the institution of Decentralized Administrations / Classification - Typology of Municipalities
- Electoral System / System of Administration of Local Authorities (OTAs) / Legal entities of Local Authorities / Constitutional status of elected officials / Institutions for social participation and control
- Finances of Local Authorities
- Development Policy for Local Authorities

Ladies and gentlemen

At this point, I am obliged to refer to the project of Technical Assistance to Greece, which aims to support the reform of the institutional framework in Local Government. A project that is thanks to you, the Council of Europe, that has launched it.

It is based on two central pillars:

1. Policy advice on the distribution of competences at different levels of Government and Local Government, as well as optimising financial resources.

2. Capacity building in Local Government to enable local authorities to provide better services to citizens. Cooperation with the Council of Europe, which provides valuable services to the Ministry for its crucial work, is excellent. Next week, we expect the completion of the Best Practices Programme in Local Government, which has allowed us to record innovative activities of the municipalities in terms of tourism and new technologies, an action the Ministry of Interior can repeat in the future.

At the same time, we are delighted that, following consultations with the Council of Europe, the Conference of the European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG) will be held in Thessaloniki in October, where the Technical Assistance activity will be combined with the debate on the framework of metropolitan areas in Greece.

At the same time for the first time in Greece, the program of the Council of Europe to the Local Government for Excellence of Governance, ELoGE (European Label of Governance Excellence) will be implemented.

Ladies and gentlemen

Greece is actively involved in the institutional processes of the Council of Europe, and is also active in volunteering in its programs. It attaches particular importance to its role and we believe that this attitude is justified.

In June 2016, the Prime Minister of Greece, Mr. Alexis Tsipras, participated as main speaker at the plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly. Last month, the President of the Hellenic Republic, Mr. Prokopis Pavlopoulos, paid an official visit to the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly.

With the expectation that my present intervention is a creative addition to their reasoning, I want to express my deep conviction that the peoples of Europe have the valuable, intellectual and political background to redefine Europe's democratic "nature", either at the central or the local level. The darkness of injustice, the populism of the far-right impasses, and the arbitrariness of the market can be dissolved. And it will be dissolved.

Thank you