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Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi

Local and regional democracy in Serbia

Strasbourg, France, 19 October 2017

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to present to you today together with my co-rapporteur Luzette KROON the draft recommendation and the report on local and regional democracy in Serbia. They were approved by the Monitoring Committee at its last meeting in June.

We visited Serbia, in particular we went to Belgrade, Novi Sad (which is the administrative centre of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) and the municipality of Kovačica from 28 February to 2 March this year. We were accompanied by Professor Anders LIDSTRÖM as expert.

Just to remind you, the last Congress monitoring visit to Serbia took place in June 2010 and the Recommendation was adopted in 2011.

We met the representatives of local authorities, notably the Mayors of Novi Sad, Novi Pazar and Kovačica Municipality, the deputy Mayor and councillors of Belgrade as well as Presidents of the Provincial government and Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

We received a warm welcome from the Serbian Delegation to the Congress and representatives of both the Association of Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities and the National Alliance for Local Economic Development.

We had high level meetings with the State Secretary of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government and the State Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, in charge of the European Union affairs.

On the level of central authorities, our delegation had also meetings with the Chair of the Committee on Finance, State Budget and Control of Public Spending of the National Assembly of Serbia, the Auditor General, the President of the Constitutional Court. We also met with Deputy Ombudsman.

I would like to thank, on behalf of our delegation, the Permanent Representation of Serbia to the Council of Europe, the Serbian national delegation to the Congress, including its secretary Aleksandra Vukmirovic and all our Serbian colleagues who contributed to the organization and the smooth running of the visit and provided us with very valuable information during and after it.

Before I continue with our findings, I would like to say a few words about the political context in the country at the moment of the visit.

Serbia is actively involved in the negotiations on the EU accession and this process seems to have a significant impact on the functioning of local self-government in the country. The reform of the system of public administration is being under way and the consultations with local self-government units have been enhanced in line with EU recommendations.

Severely hit by the economic crisis in 2008, Serbia now seems to be on the road to recovery, though it is still running a high deficit and heavy debt and is facing considerable future repayments.

The government has taken rationalisation and austerity measures to stabilise the economy and is implementing structural reforms of the public sector following the precautionary arrangements with the International Monetary Fund and in view of meeting the criteria for the EU membership.

In 2014, the Government adopted the Public Administration Reform Strategy to enhance decentralization and clarify the division of responsibilities between different levels of government. We have to admit that the progress in the implementation of different parts of the strategy has not been uniform. But during the visit it became evident to us that the government clearly identified the problems and is determined to solve them.

We acknowledge the persisting general need to modernise and improve local self-government system in Serbia and would like to encourage Serbian authorities to further pursue the declared objectives of the reform by finalising the legislative projects related to local and regional democracy and decentralisation and ensuring their effective implementation.

We will continue to closely follow the reform process in Serbia.

Now my co-rapporteur will speak more in detail about the findings of our visit.

Thank you for your attention.