

40th SESSION – second part / 40^e SESSION - deuxième partie

Speaking notes for Gunn Marit Helgesen, part I

Monitoring of the Application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Armenia (5 minutes)

Dear members,

I am very pleased to finally present today a report and a draft recommendation on the monitoring of the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in Armenia that we have prepared together with my co- rapporteur Bryony Rudkin.

This report and the draft recommendation were approved at the Monitoring committee meeting in February 2020. They reflect the situation in Armenia at the moment of the monitoring visit.

From 12 to 15 May 2019, we visited the capital city Yerevan and the municipalities of Charentsavan and Solak to meet officials of the central government, representatives of local authorities, their national association and representatives of NGOs. We are grateful to our interlocutors for their hospitality and the information they provided to us during the visit and the consultation procedure.

Before giving you a brief review of our report and recommendation, I would like to say a few words about Armenia.

The population of the country numbers approximately 3 million and more than a third of inhabitants lives in Yerevan.

Armenia has only one level of self-government, represented by around 500 municipalities (including Yerevan). The country is also divided in 9 provinces (*marzes*), but those are only administrative regions which are headed by appointed governors.

Armenia ratified the Charter in 2002. In 2013, the country ratified the Additional Protocol to the Charter on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority.

The last monitoring report and recommendation on local democracy in Armenia were adopted in 2014 after a monitoring visit that was carried out in 2013. Since then, Armenia has ratified the four pending provisions of the Charter. This is a very positive development. Besides, I would like to stress that there is a long-standing and good co-operation between the Congress and Armenian authorities.

The 2014 monitoring highlighted the following major concerns in relation to local self-government in Armenia:

- limited local government's scope of powers,
- lack of consultation,
- extensive supervision of local authorities,
- poor local finances,
- and a very fragmented territorial structure.

In 2015, the Armenian government started to implement the territorial administrative reform (called TARA) to establish, through mergers, more powerful local authorities that would be capable of delivering more and better - quality public services.

In the same year, Armenia came forward as one of the first countries to start a post-monitoring dialogue with the Congress. In 2016, it signed a Roadmap to implement the Congress recommendations aimed at achieving compliance with the Charter. So indeed, I should stress the excellent and longstanding cooperation that the Congress set up with this country.

In April 2018, Armenia faced deep changes in political landscape, widely known as the Armenian Velvet Revolution. The new Government set fighting corruption and strengthening democratic systems and institutions as priorities of their policy.

The territorial administrative reform was temporarily put on hold in 2018 to re-start in 2019. At the moment of the monitoring visit, it was clear that the amalgamation process would continue but its results were yet to be seen.

During the visit, we faced various reactions in response to the reform, both positive and negative. This is not surprising since territorial reforms are usually the most contested reorganisations of local government. That's

why the respect of the Charter in this context becomes more critical than ever.

For the reform to be successful, it is important to give some incentives to the merged communities. They need to receive more powers and, consequently, money to perform them. Efficient and wide communication on the reform, its benefits and advantages is another factor of success, which, in our view, was still missing in Armenia.

For instance, we were informed that during the recent amalgamation process some local authorities and residents learned about their communities' mergers from the press. There was no prior consultation with the affected communities on boundary changes.

My co-rapporteur, Bryony RUDKIN, will elaborate more on consultation in her intervention to follow.

Thank you for your attention.