

Dear Mr. Chairman

Dear Colleagues

First of all, let me greet you by taking this opportunity reconfirm the importance of our cooperation.

The European Committee on Democracy and Governance of the Council of Europe, being a political platform for representatives of the local democracy bodies of the Council of Europe member states, provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the current situation, to determine the main directions of the development of local democracy in accordance with the dynamically changing economic and political situation.

We note with satisfaction the effective cooperation of the authorities of our country with the Council of Europe. In terms of local democracy, our continuous work with relevant units of the Congress and the Council of Europe Secretariat is particularly important. In this context, we emphasize the projects "Democratic Development, Decentralization and Good Governance in Armenia" and "Strengthening the Institutional Capacity of the Union of Communities of Armenia and Promotion of Transparent and Participatory Local Self-Government in Armenia" implemented in recent years and the contribution of the Council of Europe expert team and especially Mr. Niall Sheerin's efforts during their implementation. This team provided the necessary support and active participation in the events organized by our joint forces, we managed to work together and efficiently, which is extremely important for us. It is noteworthy that there is a mutual desire and commitment to continue the programs aimed at the development

of local democracy in Armenia. A clear proof of this is the approval of a new 3-year program starting in January 2023 with the generous support of the Austrian Development Agency, and I would like to thank my colleague from Austria, Mr Peter Andre, for his support.

In a few words, I would like to briefly touch on the implementation of administrative territorial reforms in Republic of Armenia.

The key objectives of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI), under the Five-Year Government Action Plan 2021-2026, are: promoting proportionate territorial development; improving the quality of administrative services in communities; ensuring the continuity of the administrative and territorial reforms and decentralisation process; introducing new forms of inter-community cooperation; improving waste management and garbage collection at community level.

The process of amalgamation/ consolidation of communities under the TARA was provisionally completed in September 2022. However, the next steps of the process are crucial to ensuring the sustainability of the reform. The MTAI intends to develop a concept paper on the decentralisation of powers based on a comprehensive analysis of existing legislation and a needs assessment of consolidated communities.

Currently, the number of communities in RA is 71, of which 64 are recently amalgamated, 7 are independent: these are Yerevan, Gyumri and 5 communities densely populated by national minorities.

As a result of the unification / amalgamation of communities, opportunities for more efficient and effect local government have been created. Communities with

greater financial and human resources have been formed, which in turn made it possible to make a transition to the proportional electoral system for the formation of local self-government bodies. According to the changes made in the Electoral Code, in communities with more than 4000 voters, the elections of the community Council of Elders will be held by the proportional electoral system. Before that, the Council of Elders was formed by proportional electoral system in only 3 communities. Currently, there are 66 communities in RA, where the Council of Elders will be formed by the proportional electoral system. Local self-government elections will be held by the majority electoral system in communities densely populated by only 5 national minorities. As a result of the above transition, the communities will have a more politically active and mature Council of Elders, the latter will bear political responsibility, which is an important prerequisite for the development of democracy at the local level.

The amalgamation of communities has created another important opportunity for the development of democracy by deepening the policy of decentralization of competences and by assigning greater powers to local self-government bodies in already formed multi-residential communities, increasing their role in the public administration system.

In its strategic documents, the Government of RA has set commitments for the implementation of the policy aimed at the decentralization of authorities. One of them, the approval of the "Concept of Decentralization of Authorities in the Republic of Armenia", is scheduled for December of this year. The draft concept has already been developed and put into circulation. In 2023, it is planned to develop a strategy for the decentralization of Authorities and a program of measures arising from it. Elements of this concept were recently discussed in a public Community

Consultation meeting organised by the Centre of Expertise in the context of the current project in Armenia.

The Armenian authorities have always emphasized the issues of strengthening local democracy, expanding the participation of residents in the decision-making processes adopted at the local level, as key components of the democratic development of the society.

In fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the additional protocol of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, a legislative initiative was implemented. Amendments were made to the Law "On Local Self-Government" aimed at legislatively strengthening the participation of citizens in local self-government, increasing the transparency and publicity of the activities of local self-government bodies.

A new initiative to promote citizen participation in the activities of local self-government bodies was introduced. Residents of the community who are 16 years of age or older were given the opportunity to include a question in the agenda of the community council meeting.

At the level of the law, the obligations of the council members regarding the organization of receptions, public meetings and discussions of community residents, as well as the implementation of the order of participation of residents in local self-government in the community have been regulated.

In order to ensure freedom of information at the local level, obligations to have an official website for the community, as well as to broadcast community council meetings and other events of public significance online, have also been legislated.

Currently, such broadcasts are carried out in more than 60 large communities of the Republic, the total population of which makes up more than 95 percent of the entire population of the Republic.

The websites of the communities have tools designed for the participation of residents in the processes of raising issues of community significance and making decisions.

At the local level, citizens' service offices (CSOs) operating in the administrative buildings of 75 settlements in 56 communities of the Republic also contribute to the expansion of participation on the basis of the "one window" principle, thanks to which residents, in addition to receiving quality community services on the "one window" principle, also get the opportunity to get involved in the community management.

Thus, the current legislation provides necessary and sufficient grounds for organizing and supporting civil participation at the local level in a meaningful way.

As a result of the cooperation between the MTAI of RA and the Yerevan office of the Council of Europe, the 12 principles of good governance were successfully implemented in the united communities. In order to strengthen the perception and application of those principles, to strengthen the institutional structures at the local level, the e-training courses of the 12 principles of Good Governance developed by the Council of Europe Center of Expertise were translated. With the efforts of local and international experts, the course modules were adapted to the context of Armenia, a special module was added on equal rights and balanced participation of women and men in decision-making processes.

The educational materials regarding them were also included in the remote learning management platform launched for community servants at the initiative of the MTAI of RA, in order to further develop and strengthen the culture of good management at the local level. Guidelines have been developed for e-learning course managers, trainers and learners. Training of trainers were organized for online trainers of the e-learning course, who were then involved in supervising a full pilot course for 19 representatives of central and local officials, CSOs and the international community.

In order to increase the level of participation at the local level, since 2011 MTAI of RA has been involved in the Open Government Partnership initiative, and in all 4 action plans implemented so far, it has undertaken commitments aimed, in particular, at expanding participation and strengthening local democracy.

Thus, as a result of the fulfillment of the obligation assumed by the first program of actions of the Open Government Partnership - Armenia, the law "On Local Self-Government" was amended, and, as mentioned above, citizens 16 and above can contribute a question to the agenda of the meeting of the Council of Elders of the community and further public meetings and discussions, related to residents' participation in local self-government in the community were regulated by law.

In the second action plan of the Open Government Partnership project in Armenia, the commitments of MTAI were related to the implementation of community micro-surveys through SMS messages, improving the knowledge and skills of public servants in the fields of freedom of information and anti-corruption, as well as ensuring the publicity, transparency and accountability of the activities of

local governments in communities, in particular, the launch of websites and through online broadcasts of council meetings.

In the context of the above, obligations to have an official website for large communities, as well as to broadcast council meetings and other public events online, were legislated. It should be noted that at the moment all 71 communities have websites, and more than 60 communities broadcast council meetings.

The websites of the communities, in addition to the information related to the activities of local governments, also have a number of tools designed for the participation of residents in the processes of raising issues of community importance and making decisions.

The purpose of the commitment undertaken by MTAI in the third action plan of Open Governance Partnership - Armenia was the publication of normative legal acts adopted by the community council and the community leader on a unified electronic platform. As a result, all normative legal acts adopted by local self-government bodies since 2003 were included in the " Local self-government bodies Acts" section of the unified platform for the publication of legal acts of Armenia.

In 2018, under the fourth action plan of the Open Government Partnership - Armenia, the MTAI of RA undertook "Upgrading of Community Websites: "Strengthening of publicity, transparency and participation at the local level", as a result of which the volume of information subject to mandatory publication by local governments was expanded by law, additional tools were established for websites, through which residents have the opportunity to participate, in particular, in draft decisions developed by local governments. to the discussion, to evaluate the quality

of the services provided, to apply online to the community hall regarding the problems in the community, etc.

Recently, by the decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia, the fifth action plan of the Open Governance Partnership - Armenia was approved, which is planned for the years 2022-2024 and in which the commitment of MTAI RA refers to participatory budgeting. The pilot program launched in three communities for the purpose of implementing the above is already underway. The communities have accepted the Ministry's proposal to set aside a certain amount in their annual budget for 2023, which will be spent for the implementation of a specific initiative chosen by the population of the given community. A methodological guide was developed and provided to the above-mentioned communities, in which the tasks of the community staff are described in detail: the stages of acceptance of proposals, evaluation, selection of proposals to be voted on, the actual implementation of the proposal that received the most votes, the submission of a report on it, and the conduct of a public awareness campaign. The electronic voting component to be implemented on the communities' websites has also been developed, through which citizens will express their preference. It should be noted that voting can also be done non-electronically.

In the Republic of Armenia, there is an increase in civic activism and citizens' participation in public administration processes. The Government of Armenia constantly makes efforts to ensure the participation of citizens and civil society in decision-making processes, especially at the local level, by introducing and implementing effective mechanisms.

Thanks for attention.