

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'The implementation of the Eastern Partnership Initiative in Armenia and the development of cooperation between local and regional authorities in Armenia and the EU'

(2011/C 42/12)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- underlines that the current situation in Armenia and the trajectory of its political development have to be understood in the context of the country's religious heritage and troubled history which includes constant foreign invasions and the traumatic experience of the genocide committed against Armenians in the early part of the 20th century;
- welcomes that the first election for the Mayor of the City of Yerevan were held in May 2009 but notes that more efforts are needed on the improvement of the electoral conduct. Welcomes the fact that the capital has acquired a new status and its own law following the constitutional changes of 2005. Since the entry into force of the constitution, the focus is now on the consolidation or merger of the other local authorities. In this context, the CoR is concerned that, even though an agreement has been reached on this – and on the most important on the enlargement of powers of local authority leaders – this agreement has not yet been implemented;
- acknowledges the particular progresses made by Armenia in its relationship with the European Union notably through the 2006 joint EU-Armenia ENP action plan, the opening of an EU delegation in 2008 and the work of the EU advisory group since 2009;
- thinks it is important that negotiations with Armenia on a visa facilitation and readmission agreement get underway soon. Cutting tariffs and simplifying visa rules make a real difference to people-to-people contacts and better relations in all areas.

Rapporteur: Teet Kallasvee (EE/EPP), Member of the Haapsalu City Council

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

Political aspects and historical background

1. underlines that the current situation in Armenia and the trajectory of its political development have to be understood in the context of the country's religious heritage and troubled history which includes constant foreign invasions and the traumatic experience of the genocide committed against Armenians in the early part of the 20th century;

2. notes that Armenia declared its independence in August 1991, which was confirmed by the referendum held in September of that year. In October 1991, the population elected a president;

3. observes that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as other existing conflicts create great tensions in the region. In this regard, notes that the OSCE Minsk Group, which works since 1992 for a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has been co-chaired by the USA, France and Russia since 1995;

4. welcomes Armenia's initiative to further normalise its relations with Turkey without preconditions. In October 2009, brokerage by Switzerland with the support of the European Union, the USA and Russia led to Armenia and Turkey agreeing to establish diplomatic relations;

Influence of crisis regions on domestic politics

5. regrets that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the difficult relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan and turbulence in the international political climate have left their mark on Armenia's domestic politics;

6. notes the persisting status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and supports the continuing high-level efforts in the context of the Minsk Group to find a peaceful solution to the conflict;

7. welcomes that the new constitution (adopted in 1995 and revised in 2005) and further new legal arrangements (including electoral law) have paved the way for the authoritarian post-Soviet legacy to be replaced by democratic institutions. Nevertheless, a certain part of the population remains somewhat mistrustful of election results to date;

8. regrets that the process of ratifying the agreement between Armenia and Turkey has ground to a halt because of recent differences;

9. notes that, the Public Council of Armenia and its many sub-bodies, set up in 2009 gives many active citizens, as well as some extra-parliamentary political forces and charitable organisations, a voice in politics. The questions discussed and the recommendations drafted in the Public Council range widely and some of its recommendations are indeed taken up by the authorities, and covered in the media. Points out, however, that this advisory body cannot be a substitute for genuinely democratic channels of participation;

Local and regional authorities in Armenia

10. notes that following the administrative and territorial reform of 1996 the country now has 915 local authorities (49 urban and 866 rural). The town and local councils (comprising five, ten or fifteen members – traditionally referred to as the elders or avagani) are elected for three years. The government appoints the heads (marzpet) of ten provinces, who all belong to the governing coalition. Underlines, that these reforms constitute important steps on the way to creating a multi-layer democratic system in Armenia and thus calls on the Armenian authorities to continue in the process of empowering local and regional levels of government;

11. welcomes that the first election for the Mayor of the City of Yerevan were held in May 2009 but notes that more efforts are needed on the improvement of the electoral conduct. Welcomes the fact that the capital has acquired a new status and its own law following the constitutional changes of 2005. Since the entry into force of the constitution, the focus is now on the consolidation or merger of the other local authorities. In this context, the CoR is concerned that, even though an agreement has been reached on this – and on the most important on the enlargement of powers of local authority leaders – this agreement has not yet been implemented;

Armenia and the European Union

12. notes that the partnership and cooperation agreement between the European Union and Armenia was signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999;

13. highlights the fact that Armenia has consistently welcomed the eastwards enlargement of the European Union and its own inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy and in the Eastern Partnership;

14. acknowledges the particular progresses made by Armenia in its relationship with the European Union notably through the 2006 joint EU-Armenia ENP action plan, the opening of an EU delegation in 2008 and the work of the EU advisory group since 2009;

15. welcomes that on 10 May 2010 the EU's Foreign Affairs Council set out the framework for negotiations on an association agreement between EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and that at the first round of negotiations on the agreement which closely followed, the EU spelt out its readiness to make EUR 32 million available within the framework of Comprehensive Institution Building Programme to support the first planned reforms;

Cooperation between Armenia's local and regional authorities and the European Union

16. fully supports the mobility of students assisted by EU programmes (such as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus), but also supported by Armenians living abroad. The Ministry of Diaspora and the Ministry for Sport and Youth can make an important contribution on this front;

17. welcomes the decisive and swift progress made in relations between the EU and the South Caucasus countries, as evidenced by the start of association agreement negotiations with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. This is all the more noteworthy given the wider political changes that have affected the region;

18. welcomes the statements made by the EU representatives in all three capitals regarding priorities and key areas in the negotiations. The Committee trusts that Armenia's local and regional authorities will be given a say in matters that concern them when the agreement is being drawn up;

19. expects that the EU institutions and representatives working with or in Armenia are fully committed to bringing Armenia closer to the EU and help its political and economic progress including easier access to the European Union;

20. thinks it is important that negotiations with Armenia on a visa facilitation and readmission agreement get underway soon. Cutting tariffs and simplifying visa rules make a real difference to people-to-people contacts and better relations in all areas;

21. is convinced that the country's increasingly substantive relations with the European Union and the Union's role in stabilising and driving forward social development is having an impact and this deserves to be reflected in the media, in all forms of education and in school curricula;

22. points out that international experts and election observers have often experienced difficulties in getting the Armenian authorities to follow through on promises made to implement the relevant legislation. Recalls therefore the need for open dialogue at the appropriate levels in order to foster mutual understanding and joint problem solving;

23. welcomes the appointment (in July 2003) of an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, which highlighted the importance of regional cooperation between the three South Caucasus countries;

24. notes that the tendency to ignore political opponents has become one of the hallmarks of political life in Armenia. Transcending such behaviour must be one of the issues tackled in the ongoing dialogue and the public debate. To some extent, people-to-people contacts should begin with a discussion of politician-to-politician contacts, in particular at local level and using the ways and means available at that level such as local public councils, discussion circles, internet portals for the young. Furthermore, direct contact between individuals are crucial to foster a democratic culture of open dialogue and should therefore be supported;

25. encourages women at both national and local level to join in the public debate and to stand for important offices in society;

26. calls on the Armenian authorities, in the light of the forthcoming electoral campaign, to complete the ongoing review of electoral law with the improvements proposed by the EU institutions, and to guarantee equal media access to all political forces taking part;

27. highlights the need for constant attention regarding respect for human rights and especially the need to delve into those issues that international human rights organisations have taken up;

28. welcomes the training of human rights specialists for Armenia initiated by the Council of Europe under the HELP II project, as well as the participation of Armenian organisations in the work of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders;

29. calls on the political parties to put public dialogue and the search for viable political solutions to the challenges facing Armenian society above point-scoring. Armenians living abroad could, where possible, contribute to this process – bringing to the debate the experience of those who have lived in countries with long democratic traditions;

30. welcomes the initiative of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly and believes that, especially given the contribution of the opposition, regional cooperation between local authorities in the South Caucasus – and first and foremost cooperation between the administrations of the capitals Yerevan, Tbilisi and Baku and the debates that this involves – is proving fruitful and sets a good precedent;

31. reiterates its satisfaction that the Committee of the Regions is a party to discussions on Democracy, good governance and stability and People-to-people contacts following decisions taken in the European Union's Eastern Partnership. At the same time, the Committee reaffirms its readiness to take part in the other two parts of the platform, which concern local and regional authorities;

32. recalls that as part of its contribution to the implementation of the Eastern Partnership sits on Platforms 1 and 4, is issuing opinions on the local and regional dimension in each of the six countries, and intends to set up a regular conference of the EU and EaP regional and local authorities;

33. notes that Armenia's ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 2002 was an important step towards closer contacts with the country's local and regional authorities. It also prompted a change in electoral law and ushered in local elections in Yerevan in 2009, at which observers from the Committee of the Regions were present, and the following election of the city mayor by the council;

34. welcomes the fact that the reform of Armenia's local authorities has entered a new stage. It especially welcomes the fact that, in consequence, the Armenian authorities can now benefit from the two-year plan (2009-2011) to promote reforms – a plan drafted by experts from the LGI (Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative) and the CFOA (Communities Finance Officers Association);

35. points out its own significant role in disseminating experience and best practices (including TAIEX and SIGMA toolboxes) among local and regional authorities in the partner countries. The aim of our work is to support properly endowed, better managed and more accountable regional and local public administration that will operate efficiently while respecting transparency and inclusiveness;

36. thinks that when new initiatives arise in the Eastern Partnership countries that the population supports, then these initiatives must be heeded, just as other European institutions take note of the new institution that has been up and running for over a year – the Public Council of Armenia and the work of its committees and subcommittees – and its influence in the taking of certain decisions at national and local level. Showing an interest in an institution that has its roots in popular traditions can only enhance the standing of European experts;

37. considers it important that the Armenian authorities ensure the greatest possible transparency and the greatest possible involvement of the people in the reform processes. This is crucial because the country faces many important reforms, including that of local authority powers and funding. Support from foreign advisory and funding programmes will also be stepped up in the attempt to assist Armenia in overcoming the history of totalitarianism and a command economy;

38. welcomes the active participation of the Armenian authorities and president in the implementation of the programmes carried out at local and regional level as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership;

39. welcomes the expansion of the law on local taxes and the consolidation of a system to assess the activities of local authority leaders in 2009;

40. points out how useful the CEMAT/COE National Report on Armenia, published in the summer of 2010, has proved as a handbook in the planning of regional development, including where problem regions are concerned;

41. points out that one of the most needed of the forthcoming reforms (to cut costs and curb red tape), as well as one of the most difficult to implement, is the consolidation of local authorities and clarification of how they are funded. Equally, the reconfiguration of the relationship between the capital and other local authorities – once the law on Yerevan has come into force – will very quickly change the behaviour of neighbouring local authorities and governments, at least if experience in other countries is anything to go by;

42. believes that it would be easier to achieve success – given the stage of development of the political system – were Armenia better informed about how local authorities had been consolidated in countries (such as Latvia) with a similar fate in the past. It would be likewise helpful if reformers who have been demonstrably successful in transforming the relationship between the capital and other local authorities in other countries were able to pass on their experience (via seminars or conferences on particular topics). Pooling experience on certain issues, especially between people with hands-on experience and Armenia's representatives, must be an integral part of the EU's support programmes. This should cover not only administrative problems, but also the expenditure planning, implementation and reporting of particular programmes and projects, such as IFAD and OMP. All in all, there is no better way to promote people-to-people contacts than targeted work of this kind that produces practical benefits;

43. welcomes the fact that environmental protection issues have been given a higher priority and beefed up at local level thanks to the national action plan (2008-2012) and will follow the impact of the practical measures with interest. The climate protection issue always serves to fuel local initiatives and help a democratic way of thinking to take root. It is also worth pointing out that the 2006 Regional Environmental Charter is one of the few documents to have been signed by both Armenian and Azerbaijani ministers;

44. welcomes the fact that authorities and the public in Armenia recognise what a serious problem corruption is and appreciates that a decision has been taken to put education about corruption and how to combat it on school curricula. The best way to address this problem is through transparency, the creation of the necessary legal provisions and a gradual change of those elements of culture and mentality which allow corruption to flourish, something which can only be achieved over time through education at different levels of society;

45. takes the view that when EU representatives are visiting former communist countries and gathering their own impressions, they must also remember that flouting laws became a way of life for those living under Soviet totalitarianism. This is why new and democratic laws are needed.

However, attention must be paid to how these new laws are applied and enforced in order to build on those that contribute to better legislation and in order to demonstrate the meaning of respect for legality and the rule of law.

Brussels, 2 December 2010.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Mercedes BRESSO
