



Opening of LDA Armenia

Gyumri, Armenia, Friday, 28 October 2011

By Per Vinther, President of ALDA

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you on behalf of the Association of Local Democracy Agencies, ALDA, to the official opening of Local Democracy Agency Armenia here in Gyumri. This Agency will be number 13 in an ever widening network of LDAs.

Some people might be superstitious, but it is not a bad thing to be Local Democracy Agency no 13. Why? Because as no 13 this Agency will be able to draw on 18 years of experience of other agencies, established in the Western Balkans, and 5 years of experience of LDA Georgia, located in Kutaisi. Back in 2005 ALDA became convinced that we could successfully copy our experience from the Western Balkans here in South Caucasus and we are still convinced of that being the case.

When you are representing ALDA or an LDA you are often facing the question: What is an LDA?

An LDA is a bridge builder! It builds bridges between the various stakeholders in any community – local authorities, civil society, and the local business and educational sectors – in order to promote democracy and respect for human and minority rights.

The objectives of this process are manifold.

First and foremost is the aim to build a better and fairer community for all through dialogue between local authorities and civil society, a genuine community of values. A community where local government functions in a transparent and accountable way, where citizens enjoy the possibility of having their say not only on election day – in other words truly participatory democracy - and where business and educational institutions contribute constructively towards an environment of peace, prosperity and dignity for all citizens. This is a bottom-up approach and a holistic approach which also includes promotion of sustainable local economic development, addressing environmental issues, empowering women and youth, combating trafficking in human beings, and many more.

A second objective is to contribute to the preparation of the host country for rapprochement to the European Union. I do not want to predict how Armenia's future will turn out but there is a clear need for any country aspiring to join the European family of democratic nation states to adopt and defend all aspects of the rule of law and fundamental rights. Indeed, these are qualities that any country should want to espouse for its own sake. LDAs have contributed to the Stabilisation and Association Process for the countries of South East Europe with a view to EU membership and LDA Armenia will work in a similar fashion.

With the opening of LDA Armenia one can begin to see the outline of an LDA network for South Caucasus. LDA Georgia has been the stepping stone, and based also on ALDA involvement in the EUs Eastern Partnership our intention is to establish in the foreseeable future an LDA Azerbaijan as well. That means that in addition to implementing relevant projects in the region of Gyumri and across Armenia this LDA will eventually be able to engage in cross-border projects with neighbouring countries, co-operating with the LDAs there. I do not want to express an opinion here on ongoing efforts like the Minsk Group to bring Armenia and Azerbaijan to agree on peaceful co-existence but I am convinced that the work of the LDAs in the Region can only have a positive bearing on such endeavours.

In conclusion, I would like to thank wholeheartedly all those who have contributed positively to making the opening of LDA Armenia possible. From Rhône-Alpes who has accepted to be lead partner for the agency as well as all

the other international and national partners who have joined in, over the Union of Communities of Armenia to the town of Gyumri which has agreed to host the Agency, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and – not least – the ALDA staff members who have worked tirelessly to keep all the balls in the air until this moment. I encourage them to continue to provide support for the new LDA Delegate who is facing a steep learning curve.

My last remark for now will be that there is no magic here. Nothing is going to fly and no results will be forthcoming unless there is total involvement of international, national and local partners in the activities of the LDA.

We in ALDA cannot do it for you, but we can and are willing to do it with you!

Thank you for your attention.