



CONCLUSIONS

Hearing on local democracy in Azerbaijan – challenges and possibilities – which road forward?

On December 13, 2012 ALDA together with the Congress of the Council of Europe organised a hearing on Local democracy in Azerbaijan. The hearing took place at the Committee of the Regions in Brussels. It was a follow-up to the monitoring report on local and regional democracy in Azerbaijan that was adopted by the Congress of the Council of Europe on October 17, 2012. Key experts such as representatives from the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the Committee of the Regions and BINA - NGO Alliance for municipality development in Azerbaijan as well as one of the Rapporteurs of the Congress monitoring report contributed to the event together with Brussels based stakeholders.

Below follows a short overview of the main conclusions and actions for follow up that were identified during the hearing:

Main problems that limit the development of local democracy in Azerbaijan:

- Local authorities have limited capacity and right to collect taxes.
- State funds are not distributed on the basis of objective, clear, transparent and specific criteria established by law.
- The total budget for all municipalities in Azerbaijan is only 32.5 million Euro which is only 3.60 Euro per inhabitant.
- The skills, capacity and knowledge of staff at local administrations are poorly developed due to the lack of funding.
- Local authorities have only very limited responsibilities allocated by law.
- There is strong supervision of local authorities by state institutions.
- There is no formal procedure for consultation of municipalities through their associations in the decision-making process on issues which concern them directly.
- The capital Baku is in practice run by the central government.
- Local authorities don't have full or exclusive powers in their area.

Main recommendations to develop local democracy in Azerbaijan:

Below is a short list of the main recommendations identified at the hearing. They all correspond to the Congress of the Council of Europe's longer and more comprehensive list of recommendations adopted on October 17, 2012.

- Design a comprehensive strategy for improvement of local governance and local democracy with realistic targets and time frames for delivery.

- Review the law on the status of municipalities in order to recognize municipalities as decentralized institutions exercising public power.
- Grant full and exclusive powers to the democratically elected municipalities.
- Ensure that municipalities have financial means which correspond to their competencies and give them adequate resources to work.
- Improve the efficiency of tax collection.
- Change the status of Baku city and let it run by a democratically elected council.
- Enhance the role of the association of local authorities and municipalities.
- Involve civil society in the decision-making process at the local level.
- Support programmes with exchange of best practices in service delivery

Specific recommendations for the European Institutions to support development of local democracy in Azerbaijan:

- To include the topic of local self-government in the dialogue with the Azerbaijan government and try to convince the authorities of the long-term need and advantage of reforming and developing this area.
- To continue and increase the active dialogue and consultation with civil society in Azerbaijan.
- To the Congress of the Council of Europe to consider including official civil society observers from Azerbaijan at the Congress plenary sessions as is the case for Belarus.
- To the European Commission to ensure that the regional development programme is specifically attached to a reform agenda for the local and regional governments in Azerbaijan.

Follow-up

- The Minister of Justice of Azerbaijan Mr. Fikrat F. Mammadov committed to participate in the Congress plenary session in March 2013. This will be a critical test to see if the Government of Azerbaijan is ready to engage in a dialogue to really reform this area.
- The Congress is preparing an action plan on Azerbaijan. It will contribute to the post-monitoring procedures and cooperate with national and local authorities and associations.
- The Azerbaijani Embassy to Belgium stated at the hearing that it will inform the authorities in Azerbaijan about the problems of local and regional democracy in the country that were discussed at the hearing.
- The Committee of the Regions and CORLEAP offered to hold trainings for local and regional authorities in Azerbaijan.
- The European Commission (DG DEVCO) is in the process of shaping the next bilateral assistance to Azerbaijan for 2014–2017 and stated at the hearing that local governments should play a key role and that there is a unique chance to develop the Commission programmes and taking the provisions of the Congress Charter on local self-government into consideration.
- EEAS stated that local democracy hasn't yet been high on their agenda with Azerbaijan but following the discussions at the hearing it should be much more prominent on the agenda.